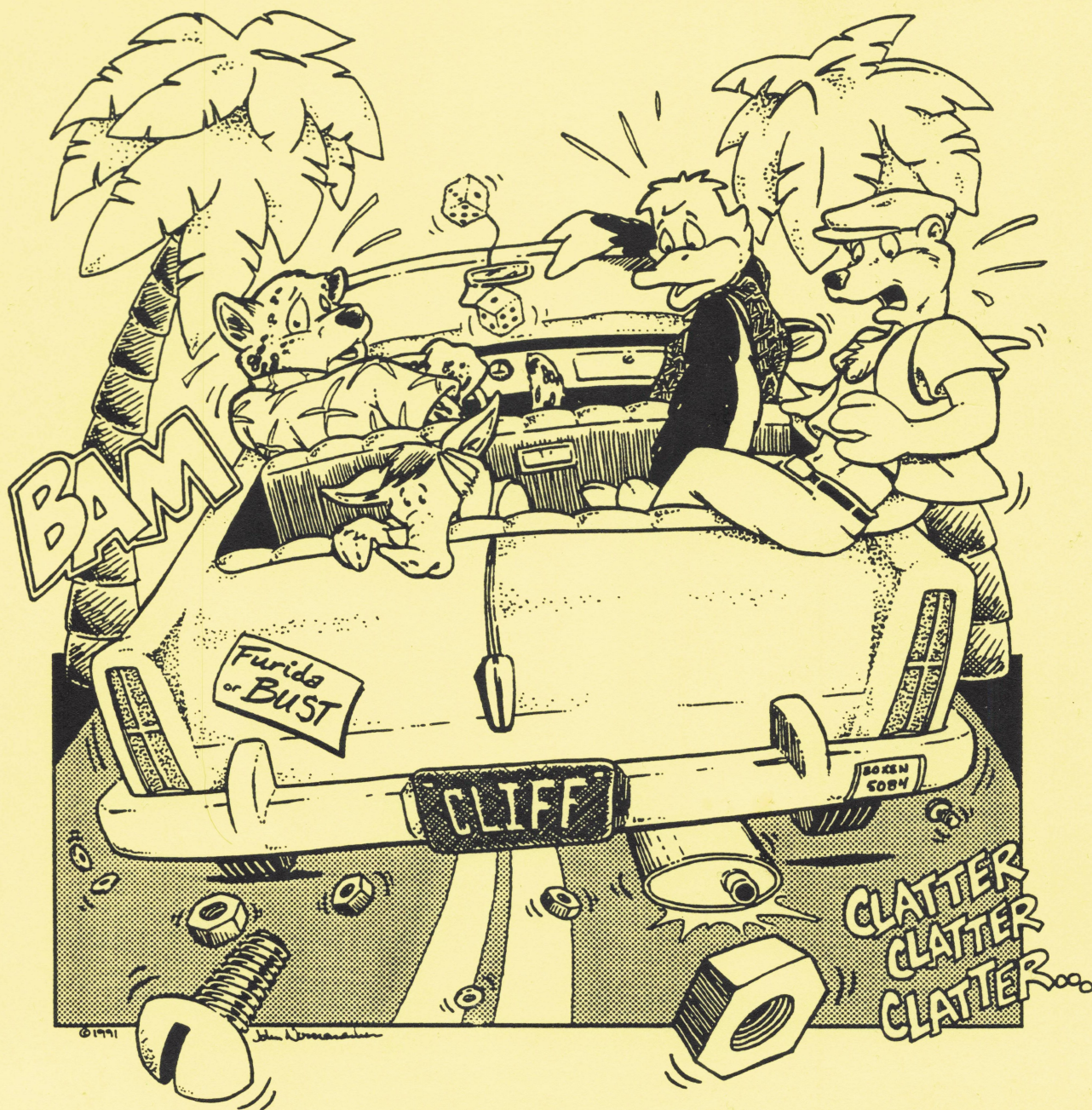


Issue
Seventeen

\$5.00

YARF!

THE • JOURNAL • OF • APPLIED • ANTHROPOMORPHICS



Monika Livingston

Price List - 1990

Black & White Character Drawings

	<u>9 x 12</u>	<u>11 x 14</u>
<u>Pencils</u>		
One Character	\$10	\$20
Two Characters	\$15	\$20
<u>Inked</u>		
One Character	\$25	\$35
Two Characters	\$30	\$40

(Larger sizes available, price quotes on request.)

Color Character Drawings

	<u>9 x 12</u>	<u>11 x 14</u>
<u>Inked, then colored in</u>		
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(Book & game covers, price quotes on request)

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Small (2 x 3) or large (3 x 4)

Color	\$15 - 45
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Logos

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2. Romantic images are ok, but X-rated erotica is not accepted.
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4. A deposit of at least 50% is required before any project is started. Balance due upon completion.
5. Mail orders are accepted: add \$3.00 for shipping & handling.



THE • JOURNAL • OF • APPLIED • ANTHROPOMORPHICS

THIS ISSUE

- Cover : "The Beach or Bust" _____ John Nunnemacher
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2. Freefall _____ Mark Stanley
3. Patten's Pontifications _____ Fred Patten
4. Robert and Katrina _____ Kris Kreutzman
5. Buffalo Wings _____ Jimmy Chin/John Nunnemacher
15. "Lighthouse" (part 2) _____ Watts Martin
illustrated by Zjonni
23. "Annabelle LeoTaur" _____ Conrad Wong
24. Empires _____ Christ Grant/Lance Rund
31. "Vixen" _____ Anthony Waters
32. "Save Your Pity" _____ Bryce Nakagawa
33. "Ocelots Have Spots..." _____ Clint Warlick
illustrated by Bryce Nakagawa
40. "Owl" _____ Anthony Waters
41. "Sundance" _____ Dave Bryant
48. "Wolf" _____ Anthony Waters
49. The Last Bits _____ YARF! Staff
Back Cover: "Nikita" _____ Lance Rund

NEXT ISSUE

- Lighthouse continues
- Fiction from Waverly Pierre
- Stuff stuff stuff.

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FLAMING HAIRBALLS

Editorial ramblings and letters of comment from us to you and from you to us.

We hate the post office.

Not only are they trying to raise postage rates AGAIN, not only is their delivery service often erratic and slow, now they have decided to change our address.

It seems the Cupertino post office, where YARF! lives, is being upgraded and rennovated. That means we have a new post office box number... why they couldn't simply let us keep our old number, we don't know. THEY don't know. Your tax dollars at work...

Effective upon your receipt of this issue, our new address will be:

YARF!
P.O. Box 1299
Cupertino, CA 95015-1299

We will have our mail forwarded from our old P.O. box (1200) for at least six months. Sigh...

Once again, we remind you that our rates are going up as of January 1, 1992. Reasons are given in the Flaming Hairballs of issue 16, but to summarize, we have lost too much money and must raise our rates to cover our ever-increasing costs and \$2,000 deficit. Current subscriptions, and all subscriptions received before the end of the year, will be honored at their current rate. Double sigh...

Call for Submissions Department: Give. Our stocks of submissions is low, and we need you! Fiction, comics, single-page art, fillos... DO IT. SEND IT. GIVE TIL IT HURTS... um,

sorry, got carried away there... you get the point, though.

Something just occurred to us... we're two years old! H'ray! Don't ask us how we made it this far without committing murder or some other mildly anti-social act... we're not sure ourselves...

See you in 45...

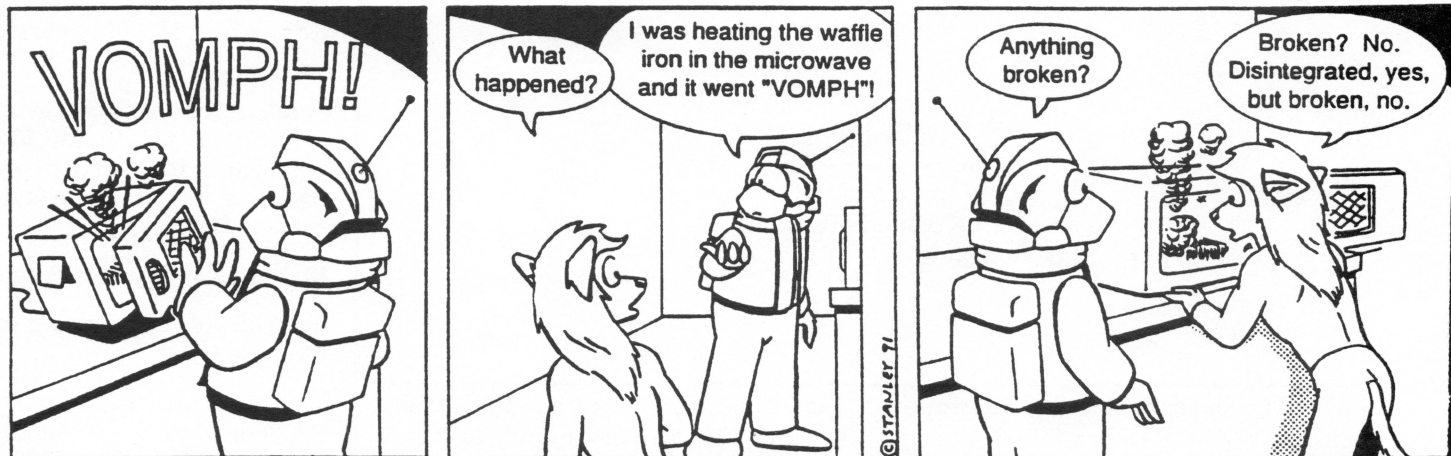
• • •

DEADLINES...DEADLINES...DEADLINES...

Life without deadlines is like steak without chocolate syrup... lord knows we can't have THAT...

Issue 18	December 14, 1991
Issue 19	January 15, 1992 (ConFurence issue, double-sized. \$6.00 cover price. New subscription rates begin. Note short deadline period! If you want your work to appear in this issue, let us know NOW.)
Issue 20	March 3, 1992
Issue 21	April 17, 1991
Issue 22	June 2, 1991
Issue 23	July 17, 1991 (San Diego Comic Con issue. Another big one...)

Freefall by Mark Stanley



Patten's Pontifications

Book Review: "Rats and Gargoyles"

Reviewed by Fred Patten

Rats and Gargoyles, by Mary Gentle. New York, Viking / A Roc Book, April 1991, 416 pages, \$18.95; ISBN 0-451-45106-6.

Rats and Gargoyles and Humans and Katayans. Katayans are just like Humans except that they have long, whiplike tails with a tuft of fur at the end. They all inhabit a weirdly magnificent city which is the real star of this novel. No name is necessary; the city dominates the world. It is a melange of the greatest cities of Renaissance Europe with their Cathedrals, their Palaces, their Universities, their wide plazas for gaudily-dressed militia to drill in, their canals and harbors, their thieves' quarters and dungeons and catacombs and networks of sewers providing secret passages everywhere. And above all, their deadly court intrigues.

In this city, this world, the Gargoyles are supreme gods. The Rats are the nobility and the army. The Humans are lower-class merchants and laborers. The Katayans are from the countryside, and the social status of the few Katayans who live in the city has not been settled yet.

Everyone is plotting against everyone else. The Rats are scheming against each other, the Gargoyles, and the Humans. The Humans are divided against each other, the Rats, and the Gargoyles. There aren't enough Katayans in the city to have a faction, and nobody is sure whose side the individual Katayans are on. The Gargoyles remain contemptuously aloof, occasionally idly destroying a building or transforming a victim into something hideous just to remind everyone of their power. But one of the Gargoyles is bored — and insane — and it decides upon a sadistic plan to amuse itself which will probably destroy the world.

The book contains reproductions from numerous illustrated 16th and 17th-century treatises on astrology, numerology, Hermetic science, and other fields of learning that were suppressed by the Church. They are the laws of physics and nature upon which this world exists: the crystal spheres of the heavens, Rosicrucianism, Masonic science, and the like. These elements are introduced slowly, so the reader does not need a background familiarity with them. They are gradually added together until a fantastically new natural universe has been constructed for the apocalyptic climax of the novel.

In her Acknowledgements, Gentle also credits the works of Alexandre Dumas. His influence is most evident in the scenes featuring the Rat nobility, which will feel familiar to fans of The Three Musketeers and Twenty Years After.

A heavily built Rat swept down the steps and ducked under the stone archway. Lucas stared. She was a brown Rat, easily six and a half feet tall; and the leather straps of her sword-harness stretched between furred dugs across

a broad chest. She carried a rapier and dagger at her belt, both had jewelled hilts; her headband was gold, the feather-plume scarlet, and her cloak was azure.

"Messire Plessiez." She sketched a bow to the black Rat. "I became worried; you were so long. Who are they?"

She half-drew the long rapier; the black Rat put his hand over hers.

"Students, Charnay; but of a particular talent. The young woman is a Kings' Memory."

The brown Rat looked Zar-bettu-zekigal up and down, and her blunt snout twitched. "Plessiez, man, if you don't have all the luck, just when you need it!"

"The young man is also from" — the black Rat looked up from tucking the canvas bag more securely under his sword-belt — "the University of Crime?"

"Yes," Lucas muttered.

(...)

"Zari..." Lucas warned.

The black Rat sleeked down a whisker with one ruby-ringed hand. His left hand did not leave the hilt of his sword; and his black eyes were brightly alert.

"Messire," Plessiez said, "since when was youth cautious?"

Lucas saw the silver collar almost buried under the black Rat's neck-fur, and at last recognized the ankh dependant from it. A priest, then; not a soldier.

(pgs. 26-27)

There are many fascinating characters of all species in Rats and Gargoyles. Those among the Rats include Plessiez, the scheming Bishop; Charnay, his earthly henchwoman; Desaguliers, the harried Captain-General of the King's Guard; and the King/s of the city him/themselves (eight pampered Rats permanently joined by their knotted-together tails).

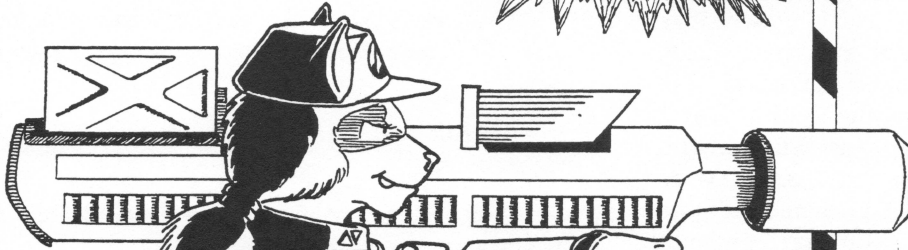
Rats and Gargoyles is not totally anthropomorphic, but there is more than enough in it to captivate the attention of YARF!'s readers.

This novel was originally published in July 1990 in Britain. The sequel, The Architecture of Desire, has just appeared there (July 1991), but it features only the human characters.

KEBEV
AND
KAVKINA

"A
HELPING
BLAM!"

NO WEAPONS
OVER
2 TONYEILD



CLEAN UP
YOUR BRASS



KREUTZMAN © 9/11/30

Buffalo Wings

©JOHN NUNNEMACHER

SLAM!!

AARRGH!!

THIS WEATHER REALLY STINKS!

GACK!

I THOUGHT YOU LIKED IT DAMP?

NOT LIKE THIS! IT'S NOT JUST WET - NOT JUST COLD - IT'S DISMAL!!

TELL ME ABOUT IT

AT LEAST WE'VE GOT A 3-DAY WEEKEND OF THIS.

HEY GUYS! MY FOLKS ARE LETTING ME USE THEIR BEACH HOUSE IN FERRETT ISLAND THIS WEEKEND!

IF WE TAKE 309 TO PHILLY-DOLPHIA, THEN 95 SOUTH, WE SHOULD BE THERE IN 14 HOURS.

WHAT DO YOU THINK GUYS?

GUYS?

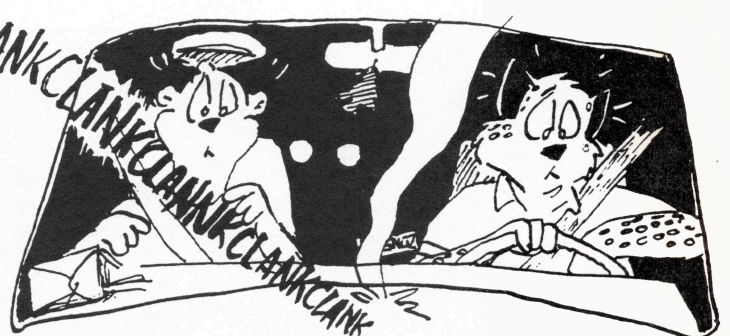
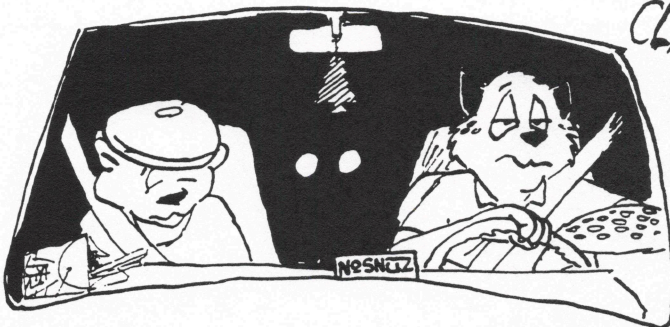
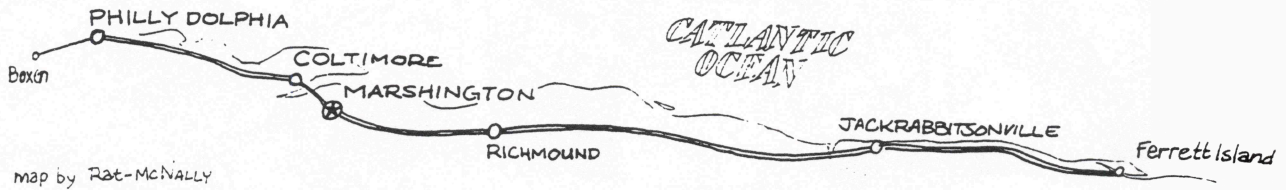
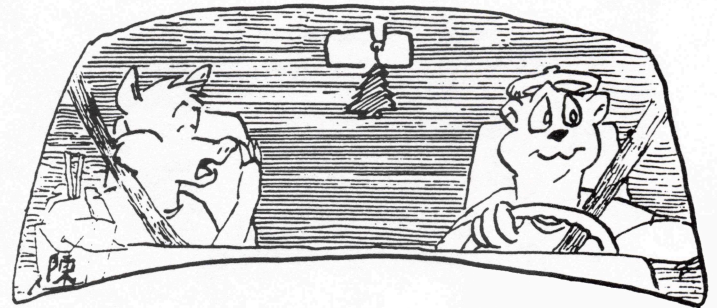
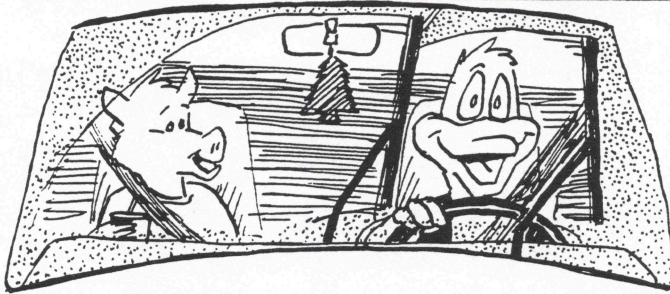
CLIFF! YOUR CAR'S ALL LOADED! YOU COMING?

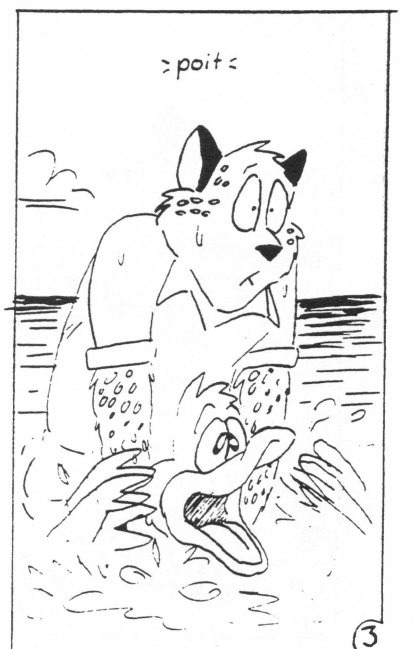
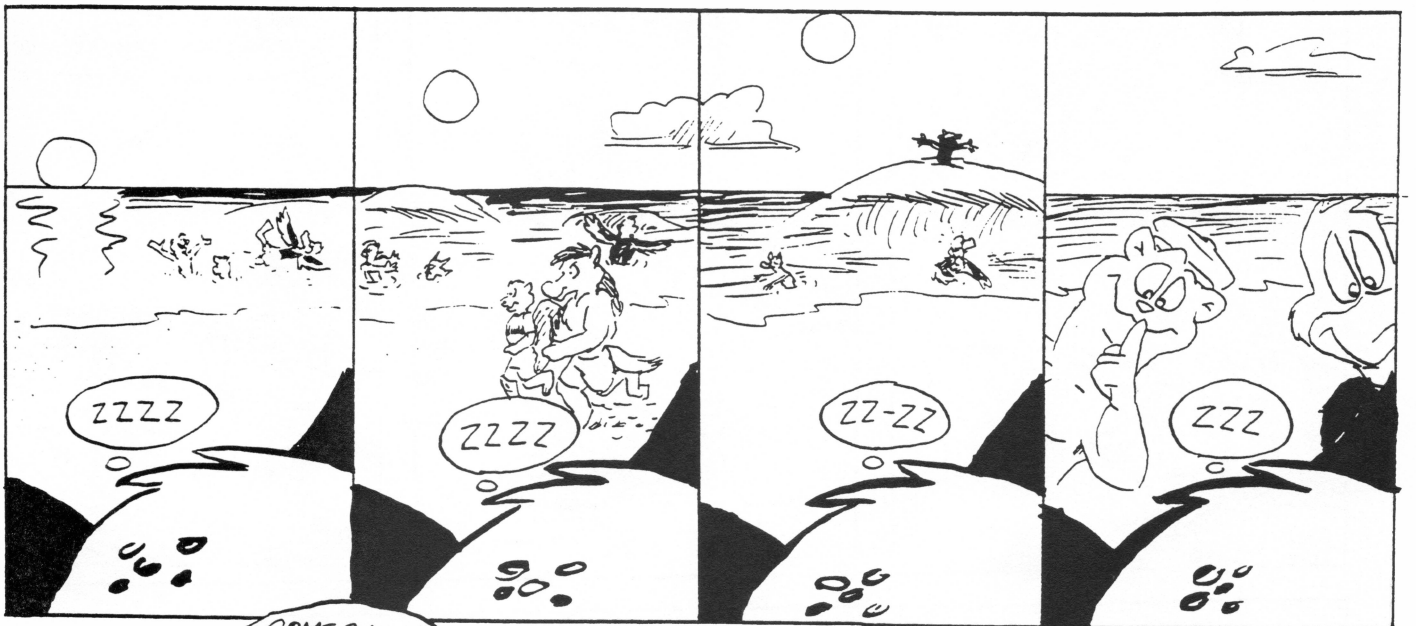
WAIT UP!

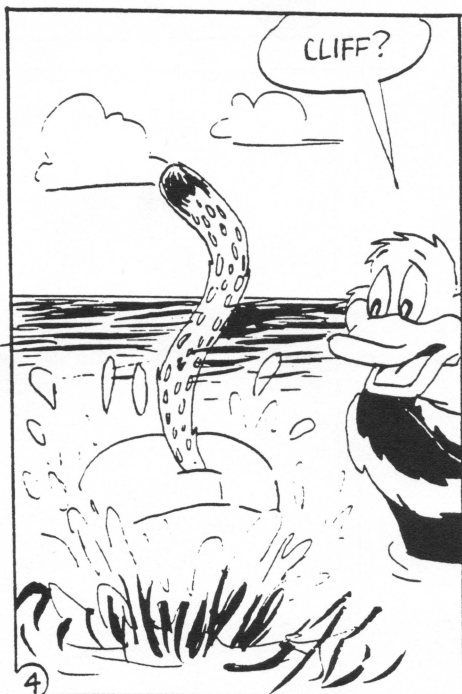
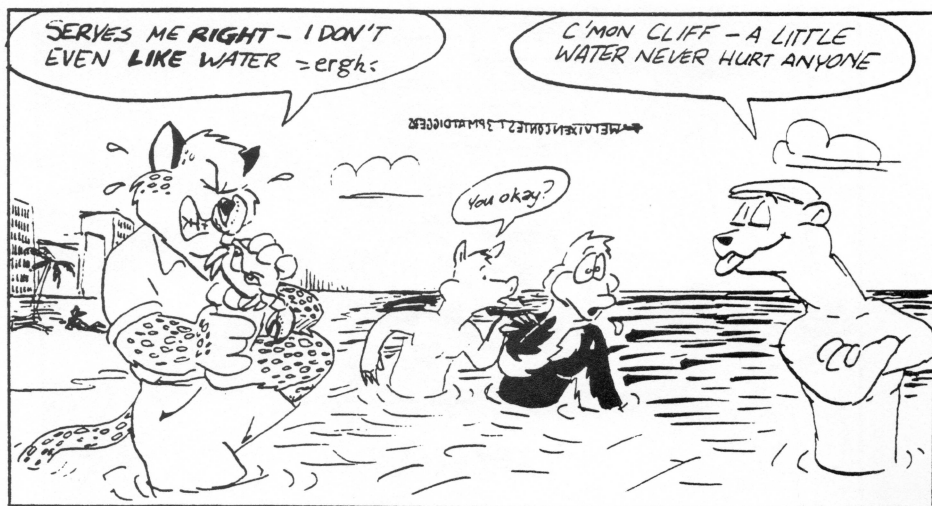
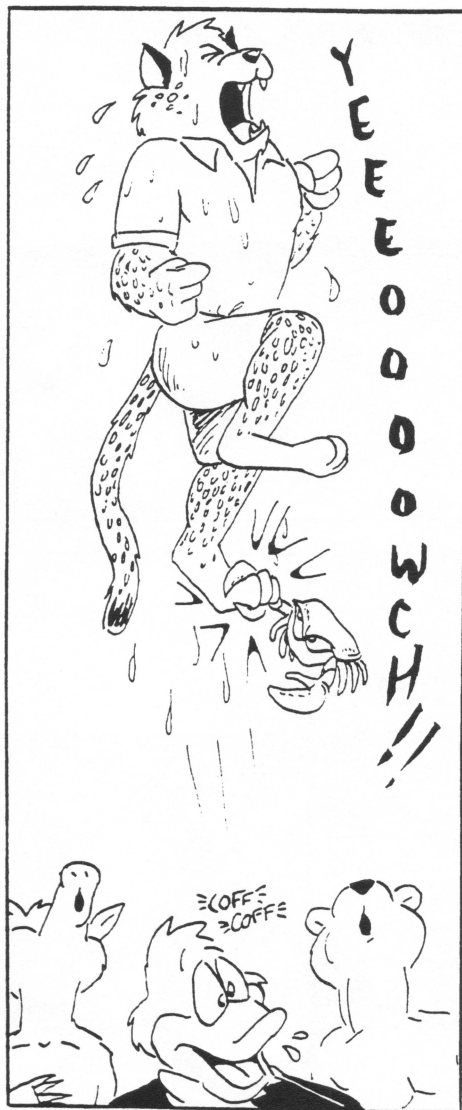
"Getting away from it all"

JOHN NUNNEMACHER ©1991 - STORY, CHARACTERS, BLAME
JIMMY CHIN - LAYOUT, PENCILS, INKS, LETTERING, TYPOS, ETC.

SO OUR HEROES SET OFF FOR POINTS SOUTH

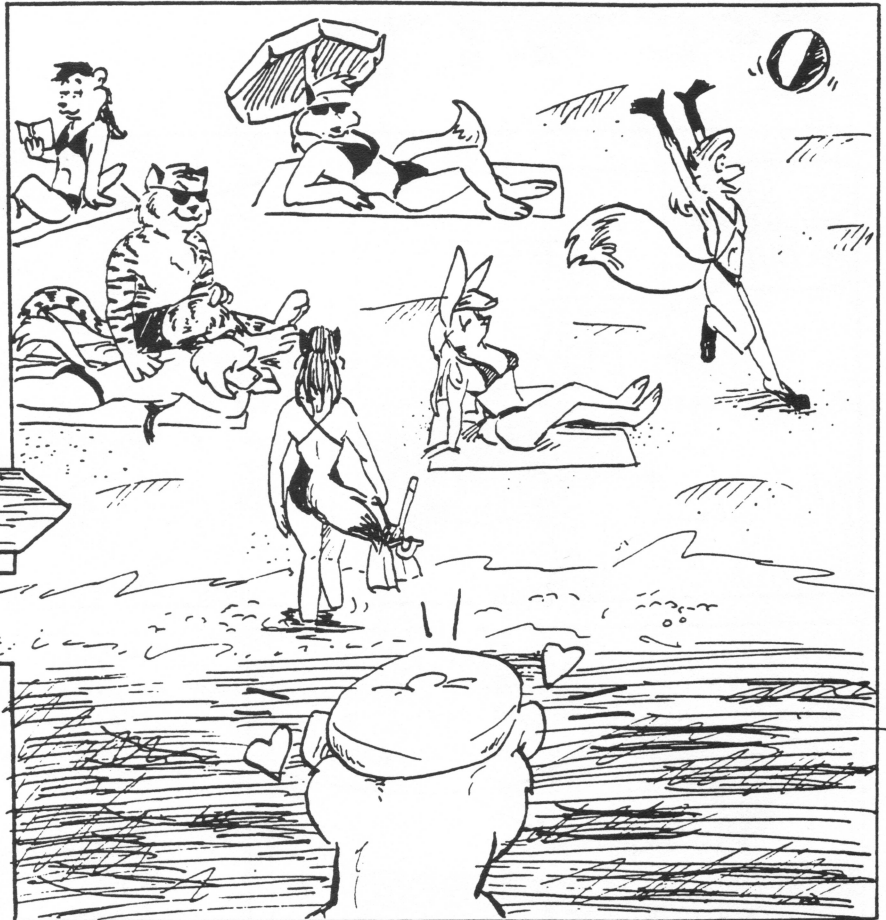




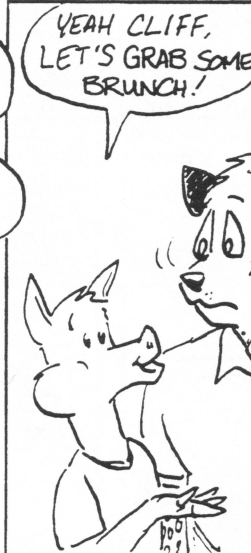




YEAH, BUT WHAT ABOUT MY LICENSE? MY STUDENT I.D.? MY CAP'N MORRIGAN FAN CLUB CARD??

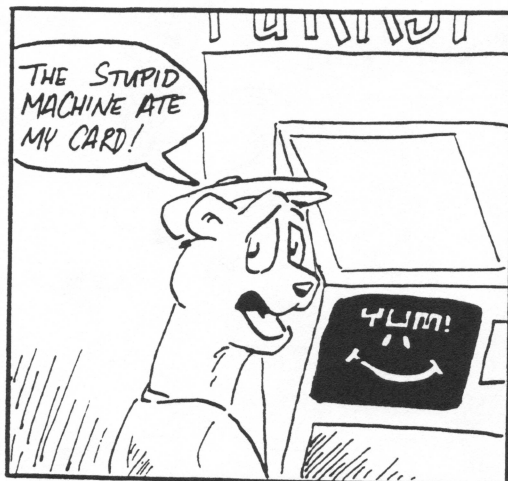


A LITTLE LATER...

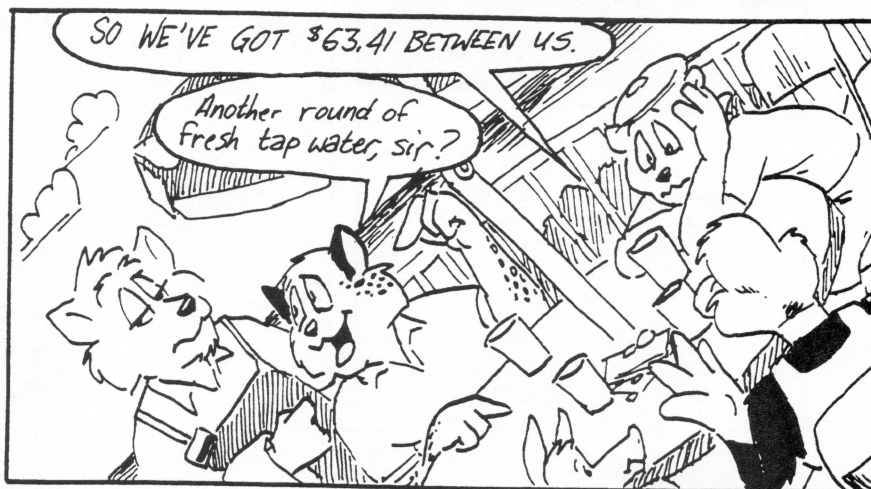




FIRST I'VE GOT TO
GET SOME MONEY
AT THIS TELLER
MACHINE



THE STUPID
MACHINE ATE
MY CARD!



SO WE'VE GOT \$63.41 BETWEEN US.

Another round of
fresh tap water, sir?



THIS TRIP IS GOING
NOWHERE. LET'S RENT
A CAR AND GO TO THE
BEACH HOUSE.



RENT A CAR?! HOW
CAN WE AFFORD THAT?!



YOU WANNA CARRY OUR
LUGGAGE FOUR MILES
DOWN THE BEACH?!



I'M SORRY BILL. I'VE BEEN
A WET BLANKET ALL DAY.

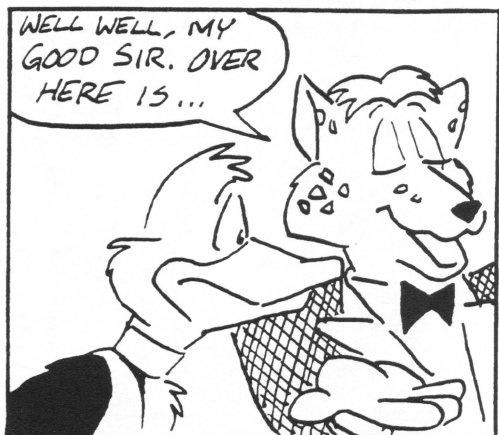


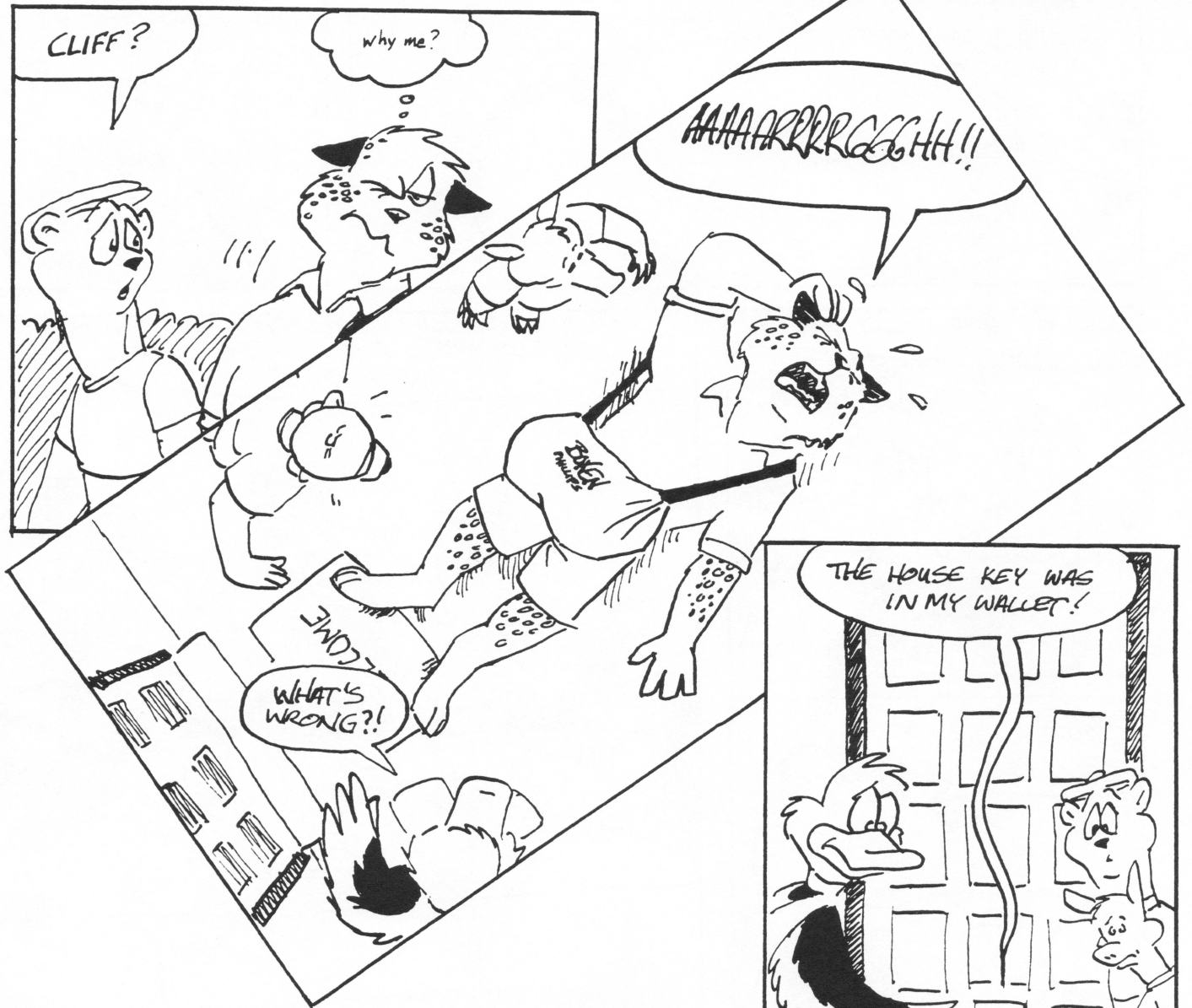
IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT. YOU
DIDN'T PLAN IT THIS WAY
AND WE'RE IN THIS
TOGETHER.



YOU'RE RIGHT. LET'S GO
FIND US A ROADSTER!

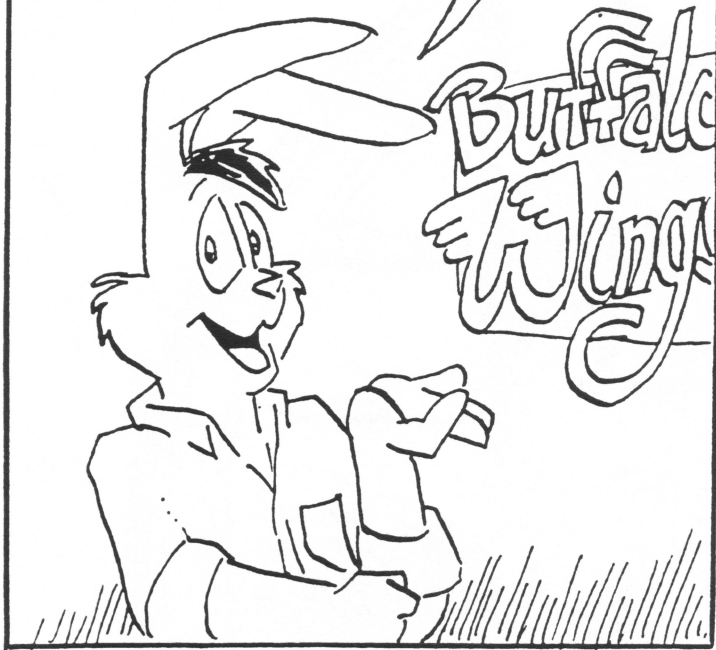
So much for
the tip...





EPILOGUE...

HIYA - JIMMY CHIN HERE. JUST THOUGHT I'D THANK JOHN FOR TRUSTING ME WITH HIS COMIC...



WITH HIS PERMISSION, OF COURSE.

BUT HE'S KINDA TIED UP BY HIS SCHOOL PROJECTS



BUT WHEN I TOOK ON THIS COLLABORATION, I THOUGHT I'D HAVE MY DEGREE BY NOW. NO SUCH LUCK. SO I'VE GOT LESS TIME FOR ART STUFF, LIKE INKING.

BUT I'VE FOUND A REMEDY FOR NEXT TIME.



DON'T DO IT BRYCE!

GOTTA INK! GOTTA INK!

CHILL OUT! HAVE A COKE!





ANNABELLE
LEO TAUR

The Lighthouse

by Watts Martin
illustrated by Zjonni

Chapter 2

Foggy orange begins to creep up from behind the rooftops of Raneadhros as I make my way back on foot to Weyrse Point.

John's door is, as I expected, unlocked. "This isn't safe," I say as I open it. He isn't in sight, though. Of course, the light is still in operation. I look at the stairs, walk to their foot, look up. And up. And up, all the way to the amber beam of light piercing the sky.

If I had to use those to climb a hundred feet, I'd feel like I was in a wheelchair. The walk back outside takes almost as long as the flight up. Stone rushing past, the wide openness of the window, down, through and *shit!*

"Are you all right?" a voice comes from three feet ahead of me, a bit to the left, moving toward me. It looks blue-white. So does everything.

"Am I standing?"

"No," John says.

"Good. I didn't think so, but I wanted to make sure." I close my eyes and shake my head. Everything still looks blue-white, so I open them again. "Had to be a damned showoff," I say, crossing my arms and hissing at the light. When I was little, I would always get up early and watch the setting sun; I wanted to know why I couldn't fly up close to it. Now I truly understand why that would have been bad.

"Are you going to be all right?" I hear John lean over me, and feel, somehow, his arms reaching toward my shoulders before they touch.

"Yes," I assure him with false confidence as he helps me up. "I've been out all night looking...." I blink involuntarily and shudder. The white is fading, but the blue is still there. Dammit— "looking for a fence."

"Why?" John asks. He sounds genuinely baffled.

"John, one of two things is happening." I close my eyes and start rubbing them. "One, the Ranean Guard itself is framing your dead wife. In my experience, the Guard is rarely corrupt, only incompetent, so for the moment that seems unlikely.

"Two, they are telling the truth as they know it. Her name was in the records they found, and the evidence points to her association with the pirate ring. If that's the case, we need to find out why."

"They needed a scapegoat," John mutters.

"Why Marilyn?"

"I don't know. Why isn't the Guard going after the fence, money launderer, whoever it is, who's working now?"

I laugh. "I'd guess they don't have the slightest idea who it is. Whoever they caught isn't talking, and destroyed all his records before they got him."

"Then how could they have gotten Marilyn's name from this?"

"I don't know."

"How are your eyes?"

"Much better," I lie. John grunts, and clicks off the light with a deep, resonating snap that I feel in my wingtips.

"Good. I'm sorry I can't be more helpful, but I need to get some rest," he says quietly. His voice has lost the brightness of yesterday; for the first time since we met, he sounds like an old man. "Thank you for trying. It really does mean a lot." The stairs start to creak as he steps onto them. "Do you have a room somewhere? You can sleep on the couch. It's not—"

"I do. Thank you. I might just sit here and... rest a bit first."

"Okay. Good mornin', ma'am." When I point my ears at the stairwell, I hear the faint creak of his steps all the way down to the floor.

Let me keep thinking about this, John. Either your wife's name was placed in false records that the Guard was expected to find, deliberately setting her up, or the pirates' broker hadn't been careful when he destroyed the real ones. Which would mean she was one of them.

If she was, then how could you not know? But if you did,

there'd be no reason to involve me. Having a neutral party investigating things would be an unnecessary complication, and you could have gotten rid of me yesterday merely by not sharing the affidavit. And if the pain you appear to be going through isn't genuine, you're the finest actor I've ever seen.

I'm too tired for this. I lean up against... against... whatever is behind me and close my eyes. The world seems a little darker, but it may just be wishful thinking.

Sometimes when people see my eyes, the solid blackness of them, they assume I am blind. Perhaps now they would be right.

I'm not used to being scared for myself.

• • •

There is a voice, just on the edge of my hearing, but I can't tell who speaks. Am I dreaming? I struggle to open my eyes—

Light, dim green light filled with dancing blue spatters, shines from something above and behind me against—against something in front of me. Dammit. Against a metal pedestal. The pedestal the big light rotates on. Unless it's my imagination.

I sit very still, beginning to feel the coldness of the stone behind me seep through my wings. No, I have never seen the pedestal before. So I am actually *seeing* it now, blue spots and all. The voice is real, and I still do not recognize it. Rising to my feet, I lean over the edge of the window and look down.

"...don't have time for this," the voice is snapping. I can make a figure that is not John next to the bear, who is standing in the doorway a little more than one hundred feet straight below me. The figure, of course, looks blue.

"I don't know what—" John starts to say. The figure hits him, hard. I think the bear falls down.

"It'd better fuckin' come to you," the figure says, stepping back.

Here it comes now, friend. I pull myself through the window, a bit more gracefully than I landed there this morning, and step into the air. The sunset seems peculiarly gray. Have I really been asleep since sunrise? It disappears as I turn headfirst and start to plummet, opening my wings. I haven't done this in far too long.

John is rising to his feet. The other figure is a male fox. He is stepping forward. Wings out— He looks up. Hmmm. Mouth wide open and teeth bared for effect as the dive turns

sharply, heading right toward him. The split-second I see of his face as my body passes a hair's width above it shows pure, mortal terror. Legs down, hands back, and a *rip!* as his weight pulls me down. And a scream as he is dragged along by my claws.

This is a lot more difficult than it looks. When a hundred-fifty pounds suddenly gets attached to your wings—which are almost straight back then—you have to time things perfectly. It's far easier to grab with your back claws, but not nearly as psychologically damaging to your prey.

But there is no difficulty this time. When we stop, I am standing over the fox, one foot on each side of his waist; his head is at my knee-level. Only my fingertips seem to be touching him, pressed against his shoulders with my palms turned toward the ground. He is held in place by the claws buried deep in his flesh.

This is, of course, another potential problem. When you grab someone as you come out of a dive, it takes very good coordination to just spear the shoulders. About three inches lower and the fox would have been dead before I caught my breath. I'm too careful for that, though; the one time I hooked someone through her heart, it was quite intentional.

I have no desire to do more damage to the fox, who has his eyes screwed shut and is literally howling with fear, but he has no way of knowing that. I kneel, letting him drop to the ground with a thump, and yank out my claws. He screams, the blood starting to flow freely. Now straddling him, I sit down on him and— Oh, for God's sake. He's wet his pants. I slide up a few inches, up to his waist, and notice he is bleeding orange-grey.

No, out of one eye, it's an entirely wrong shade of something close to red. Out of the other it's just black.

The fox opens his eyes and reaches up, as if to try and push me off. I grin down at him, making sure I have his complete attention, and carefully lick his blood off my claws, one by one. By the time I reach the last finger, the idea of fighting back is completely forgotten, replaced by a pathetic, trembling whimper. In spite of the way he attacked the bear a moment earlier, I feel a bit sorry for him.

There is a whisper behind me. I turn my head slightly; John is praying under his breath. "What did he say to you?" I keep my voice soft.

"I..." John stares at my face, eyes wide. It is only there for an instant: a look of fear directed at me. "He wanted to know what I told the Guard. And then he... asked where the records were. He wouldn't believe me when I said I didn't know."

Oh, John, I didn't want you to be scared of me, too. I sigh as

I turn back to the fox and lay one of my hands across his throat. "Why do you think he knows?" I ask, still softly.

The fox's mouth opens, but no noise comes out. He tries again, producing a small squeak. "Knows?" he finally says.

"Knows where the records you're looking for are."

"He squeak!..." His voice becomes a cough, and he shudders. "He... has to know."

"Why?"

"Because he has to, dammit!" he barks, desperation giving him coherence. "She was his wife!"

"What records do you think she had?"

"The ones she kept."

I smile and tap a claw on his windpipe. "Don't be evasive."

"You know," he says. "Shit, you probably know more than I do." He gulps. "Buyers. Sellers. You know." He moves his hands toward me; I press harder until he drops them.

"She's been dead ten years. If these records existed, why wait until now to come get them?"

"I don't know."

"That's not good enough."

"I swear I don't know!"

Tap. Tap. "Do you know what I am?"

He gulps again. "A vampire?"

"Close. A vampire bat. You see, most people just see you as another thug. But," I lean close to his face, dropping my voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "I don't. Know what I see you as?"

He shakes his head.

"Food." I nip him, very lightly, on the nose, and he screams. "Now. Why, after ten years, are you just now looking for Marilyn Brown's records?"

The fox abruptly starts sobbing. "Please. I don't know, I swear to God I don't know, maybe they just found out she had kept 'em or something but they don't tell me why, I was just supposed to go get 'em and make sure the old man hadn't told the Guard anything. Please. Please don't eat me, lady."

"Who sent you?"

He turns his head away from me.

"Have I mentioned you have very sweet blood?" I place my right hand under his muzzle, twisting it up and to one side—far enough to bare his neck, but not so far he that he can't watch my open mouth as I move it, as slowly as I can, toward his face.

"No!" He squirms, but is far too terrified to do anything effective. "Please! If I tell you anything they'll kill me!"

I keep lowering my head, stopping with my nose almost touching his eye, so all he sees as I speak is my tongue and teeth. "They'll kill you quickly," I whisper. "I won't."

"Cayne Wortham!" he shrieks.

"And what's your own name?"

"Marn... Beldis."

I let go of his muzzle and, very gently, caress his forehead. "Thank you, Marn. I'm glad you stopped by; you've saved me a lot of work."

I turn toward John, who is still standing in the doorway, looking only slightly less terrified than the fox. "Do you have any bandages and salve?"

He blinks in confusion, then steps inside, reappearing a moment later and setting both beside me. "Thank you." I turn back to the fox, who has relaxed enough to resume sobbing uncontrollably. "You don't mind if I take off your shirt, do you?" I say, unbuttoning it. He stares up at me with a new expression of horror, as if the possibility I might rape him just entered his mind. When I start cleaning the wounds, he manages to add profound puzzlement to the emotions on his face.

After covering the gashes with salve, I stand and pull him to his feet, then carefully bandage both shoulders. He is trembling so violently it is difficult to get the tape in place. "I don't want you to lose any more of that nice blood, Marn. After all—" I place my hands lightly on his arms and press my chin against his chest, looking up at him with an innocent expression. "We might meet again sometime."

He stumbles backward, eyes as big as two moons, then bolts toward the mainland, wailing.

John has retreated to the door, leaning against it and watching me. The price I have paid for Marn's information is in the bear's eyes. Even if he still trusts me, there will be a slight wariness, a trace of doubt, somewhere under the surface. It may never go away. "I'm sorry," I say, unable to meet his eyes.

"Would you really have killed him?" he asks after a moment.

"No. But he had to believe I would." I wonder if I am being

honest. A week ago I would have said without a moment's hesitation that I'd never deliberately kill someone who hadn't tried to kill me or one of my few friends. But if John hadn't been standing there, I might have ripped the fox's throat open after he gave me what I wanted. Just to see if he could become even more terrified in death.

I drop to the ground, face in my hands. What's happening to me?

After a moment I become aware of the bear's arm around me. I look up at him; his face is filled with a concerned incomprehension. He believes that I'm revulsed by the encounter because I didn't enjoy what I did to Marn. There is no way to explain that the problem is precisely the opposite.

• • •

"Nice outfit," a human observes. I am wearing what I call my "backless jacket," a swatch of dark red cloth that fastens around the back of my neck, a large 'V' cut out all the way down to a point centered between my breasts and two long straps that wrap around my back, just under the wings, and tie in the front to form a belt. The matching skirt falls just halfway to my knees and is slit all the way to the top on the left side. I have been told it makes me attractive as possible given my none-too-pretty facial features. Tonight the outfit looks slightly purple, or a murky green-grey if I look at it out of my right eye only.

"Thanks." I lean just enough to give him a good view down the 'V.' His eyes widen slightly as I brush past, heading toward the bar.

Shortly the bartender comes over to me. The fat man I remember from the time I was here a few nights ago is gone; in his place is a thin, reedy younger human. "Just a bourbon."

"Straight?"

"Over crushed ice."

He nods and ducks behind the bar, producing the drink in record time. As he hands the drink to me, I ask, "I don't suppose you've heard of a man named Cayne Wortham, have you?"

He shakes his head, looking quite blank. It was a longshot, but all the likely places have come up blanks, too. At least here I know the drinks won't be watered.

There's only a half-hour left before the bars close. But by tomorrow afternoon there's a good chance Wortham will have heard a female bat is looking for him.

"Hey, Reverb!" a bouncy voice calls from behind me as the glass is halfway to my lips. It sounds familiar. "I've been looking for you!" Bounce. Bounce. The turtle who owns the voice bounces into the stool next to me.

Where in the hell—? One of my first nights in Raneadhros, that was it. I was starved for blood and completely drunk, and had just managed to catch someone drunker than I was. He was moaning a lot but not fighting as I drank; I'd probably be finished before his nerves finally got the message "You've been attacked" to his brain. And this turtle was there, somewhere, trying to carry on a conversation with me. He had absolutely no fear, despite the fact I had just opened a man's throat and was lapping up blood in front of him.

"That's Revar," I say, setting down the drink.

"Right," he says, looking mildly offended. "Where have you been? I kept expecting you to come back here, and—"

I place a hand on his shoulder. "I can't quite remember your name. Soup, was it?"

"No, Turtle. Anyway—"

"I've been rather busy. I still am."

"You know, I've always thought it would be interesting to fly." He looks intensely thoughtful for a minute. "You know, if you could hover, you could be right over a stage when—"

"Why were you looking for me?"

"Oh. I have something really, really important to tell you."

No doubt. I take a drink and look at the reptile expectantly. He waves one of his hands a few times with one finger out, as if to emphasize a point, then waves the other one once, a pained expression on his face.

"Well?"

"Don't rush me," he says. "You know, there are maybe a dozen women in Ranea who could wear that outfit successfully."

"Am I one of them?"

"Oh, yes." He sighs. "Oh. Wait. It's... you see, it's... it's... it's *completely slipped my mind!*" He bangs both fists against his forehead, then immediately looks like he regrets having done so.

"I'm sure it wasn't that important, then."

"But it was!" He sounds more agitated than desperate. "Not only *was* it that important, it has profound bearing on not only the rest of your entire life, but on those of others around you. Perhaps even the course of history itself." He hops

down from the barstool, then looks up and shrugs. "Well, see you later."

I watch him disappear into the crowd, then let out a long, drawn-out sigh and finish my drink in relative peace.

• • •

The room I am staying at has no furnishings but a knee-high table that is serviceable, if not pleasant, when sitting, a dozen fluffy pillows, and a solitary mattress that takes up one-third of the floor. The mattress is tough, only two inches thick and quite comfortable in spite of itself. It is nearly nine feet long and wide enough to sleep three people without seeming cramped. I am told this is a common hostel arrangement in Raneadhros, designed so everyone from dwarves to musclebound tiger zoomorphs can sleep in the same room without too much difficulty (or expense for the innkeeper). Curiously, the ceiling is only a bit over six feet; I suppose giant guests are expected to stoop.

Pale orange curtains cover the walls and ceiling, a matching carpet on the floor; the mattress and sheets are a darker orange-red. Perhaps someone thought it would give the

room a bright, warm feeling. To other people it might.

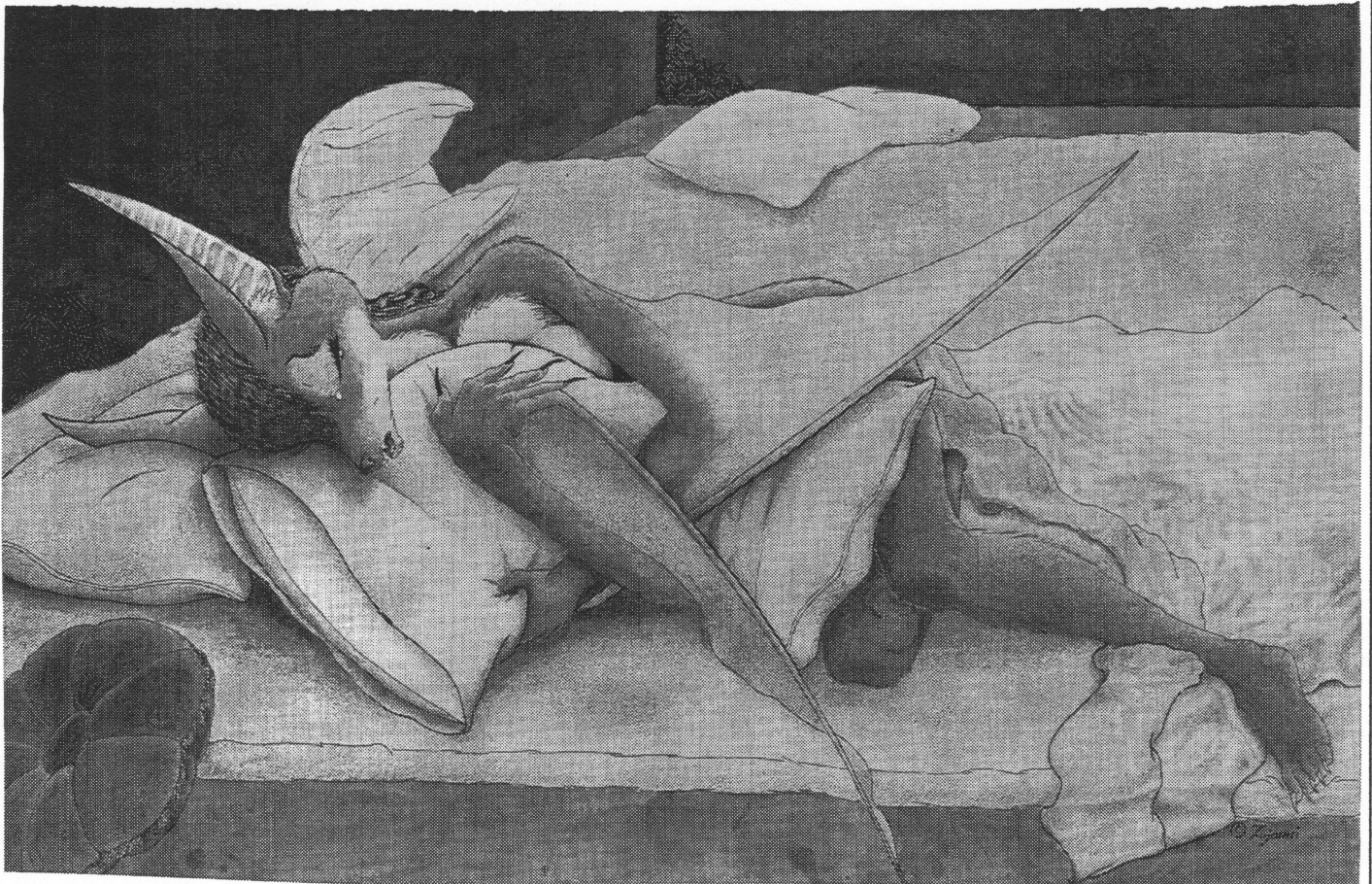
I close my left eye and the room changes. It is redone in blues and greens and greys, as if I was back underwater, no longer drowning but visiting a mermaid's cottage. The curtains are yellowed grass. I unfasten my top and toss it amongst the pillows; the bottom follows a second later. Then I put out the light, and the dark monochrome of night vision makes both eyes normal again.

Sitting down in the center of the mattress, the room is colder. No: it is empty. I lie down on one side of it, the sheets crumpling under me. I am very small against its expanse; on my side, looking toward the wall, it stretches invitingly, waiting for someone else to fill its space.

We never made love. We never really had the chance.

I'm not sure I've ever made love. I have had sex, sometimes with people I thought I was in love with. But I don't think I've ever made love.

Maybe it's a meaningless distinction. Maybe sex is sex. It's not a subject I know much about. Few non-bats were ever attracted to me, past trying to look down my dress. Out of the handful that were, it was an even split between men looking for women to completely dominate them, and men wanting



to prove they could dominate such a woman. I made both of those mistakes once. I suppose I understood Jemara more than I ever let her know. Ah, that was stupid: Bringing up the other one you've lost. At least it wasn't by your own hand.

I would have liked it, very much, if we had made love. That night in the park....

I grab a big pillow, half my own size, and crush it to me awkwardly, its cool softness rubbing against my fur, across my stomach and thighs. In a little-girl way, hugging it to me is comforting. I can pretend I am holding Mika.

But it will never purr.

• • •

Whak!

The first noise wakes me, but it takes me until the third repetition to identify it as someone knocking on my room door. A glance at the window says it's some time after noon. Dammit, I don't like this schedule. You're not supposed to be fully awake hours before sunset any more than you're supposed to sleep through sunrise.

The noise at the door changes to a soft clicking. I still haven't made any noise and the person outside seems to have concluded the room is unoccupied, and therefore is in the process of picking the lock. The door will be open before I could put on any clothes, so I sit up, facing the entrance, and gather my wings around me to hide most of my torso. I wonder if I could go out in public like this without breaking any laws? Only until I moved my arms.

In a few more seconds, the door swings open softly, and a short, wiry human follows it, looking back over his shoulder to make sure nobody outside sees him come in. Then he shuts the door behind him, still without looking in my direction. Okay, sir, you've just broken into a vampire bat's room without knowing she's there, and made absolutely sure that nobody's around to see you come in. Or come out. Did you bring your own seasonings, too?

Satisfied the door is completely closed, he turns around and looks up. His eyes widen only very slightly when he sees me, but his entire body tenses. He has a ruddy complexion, fairly attractive hazel eyes that neither match nor clash with the nondescript dark blue top and short pants, and brown hair clipped close in a military style. "You should lock your door," he says softly. The voice is somehow both low and reedy. Then he realizes I am wearing only wings, and his eyes widen noticeably further.

"I'll keep that in mind," I say softly. "Are you looking for something?"

"I've found her," he replies easily, letting his eyes wander over me. If it is a move calculated to unnerve me, it might work under other circumstances. Now it just makes me more irritated.

"You were looking for a naked bat." I keep my voice pleasantly blank.

He smiles thinly. "Actually, naked wasn't a requirement. Just a female bat."

"In that case, turn around." He raises his eyebrows. "I'm going to put on some clothes."

"And you're like a nymph?" He continues smiling. "Of such legendary beauty that the sight of your nude form would cause me to go blind?"

"No," I say, smiling back. "I'll just rip your eyes out."

He laughs, a bit uneasily now, and turns to the door. I grab a simple brown halter top, fastening it through the flap in my wings, and pull on a pair of ripped denim shorts. "All right." I sit back down on the mattress, hands on knees. "What do you want?"

"That's my question." He leans against the door as if to block my exit. I stare at him in what I've learned is my most unnerving fashion, as if to suggest that I'd go right through him if I wanted to leave. He coughs.

"Should I want something from you?" Hmmmm. "You're Cayne Wortham."

He nods, then laughs at the shadow of doubt that crosses my face. "I know. You were expecting someone six-foot-five who can rip doors right off their hinges and juggle them. That's not my job. I have people who do that sort of thing for me."

He walks a bit closer, then squats on one of the pillows, facing me. "But you're pretty good at intimidating them."

"Anyone can be intimidated."

"And what about you?"

"I'm not just anyone."

"Oh?" He raises his eyebrows, his smile fading. "You're someone who's making it difficult to finish a matter my employers would like to see resolved."

"And how would you like to see it resolved, Wortham?" I say softly. "By beating an old man for information he doesn't know? Or by framing his dead wife for something she didn't

do?"

Wortham purses his lips, then expels his breath explosively, standing up. "You don't know shit about this, lady."

"And neither does he."

"You expect me to believe that?" He snorts and turns toward the door. "This doesn't have to be any of your business. You really don't want to keep pursuing this."

He has moved three steps before I have risen, spun him around and pinned him to the door. "What I'm pursuing," I hiss, "is just answers. I don't care what you do with your life. But I care what you do to John's. Did his wife work for you?"

He blinks, then smiles down at me, trying to look like the claws at his throat don't concern him at all. "What you don't know won't hurt you."

"It might hurt you." I press a claw more firmly against his neck.

"Then it'll probably hurt the bear a lot, too."

"It is true, isn't it?" I release him slowly. He looks at me without making a noise or moving his head, but the answer is in his eyes. "He believes she was set up."

"We all have our fantasies, don't we?" He turns toward the door.

I place a claw on his shoulder. "Leave him alone," I say flatly. A brief image of moving the claw down to his stomach, sinking it in and ripping him open up to his sternum seizes me.

He shakes his head, very slightly. "We all have our jobs to do, too." He starts to move away, but I tighten the hand, holding him in place. "It's not up to me," he grits.

"What the hell is it going to take?"

"Her records," he says after a moment.

"How the hell can ten-year-old records be damaging?"

He stares fixedly at the door handle. "Organizations like ours don't change very much in a decade."

I could still slit your gut. Bastard. As my hand drops from his shoulder, he says without turning around: "As far as I'm concerned your bear knows less about the truth than you do. I said this was my job. That doesn't mean it's my decision." He opens the door and quietly steps out.

Well, that's it, then: I let myself get dragged into this to find out whether or not John could clear his wife's name, and now

I know. The Guard was right.

But somebody in the "organization" is damn worried about these records coming out. All she should have is lists of clients, most of whom have probably been out of Ranea for eight years by now. If they were worried about bank numbers, those could have been changed within a few days. And the accounts Marilyn was using were certainly changed when she died just to be safe.

And this still doesn't answer: why now? If they thought John had these records, why not go after him ten years ago?

Maybe they didn't know the records existed until recently. Or maybe somebody was just sloppy; they didn't think the records would ever be found, and it didn't start worrying them until the Guard began busting pirates a few days ago. That sort always seems more concerned with the romantic image of piracy rather than the business end. Wortham may work for the pirates, but he hasn't set foot on a floating dock, much less a ship.

So now they realize they screwed up ten years ago, real big, and they're in a panic. Maybe.

But whatever the real story is, John is caught in the middle of it.

I sit down on the bed, wondering why I am taking pleasure in graphic images of what I could have done to Cayne Wortham.

• • •

As I approach the lighthouse I can hear voices from inside, one John's, the other thin and sibilant. It sounds exasperated.

I fling the door open loudly so both of them stop talking and look over. The other voice belongs to a stoat, immaculately-combed tan (or greyish aqua) fur barely visible under a tight-fitting bright red (or dark black) Guard uniform. He smiles very slightly when he sees me, then turns back to John.

The bear is crying again.

As the stoat starts to speak, I cut him off with a hiss. "What did you tell him?"

He looks over at me, then back at John, then closes his eyes for a moment. "Nothing that isn't true."

I cross over to John and sit beside him on the bed. "Was she?" he says softly.

Should I lie to spare his feelings? But it's not up to me: the

Guard has already told him. "Yes," I say helplessly, knowing that part of him will die with the word.

He bows his head, squeezing his eyes shut, and clenches his fist and trembles.

"I'd like to see you outside," the Guard says softly.

I snap my head up. "Can't you see that—"

"Not him," he says. "You."

Oh, damn. I grit my teeth as I follow the stoat out; he closs the door behind us.

"Why are you here?" he says. "It's becoming obvious that you're investigating this case, too. Why?"

"I was trying to help a friend. And I think I've failed."

"Not necessarily. Tell me this: why do you think we're going after these records this hard?"

"Because you're hard up for anything useful, and this is all you've got."

"Yes, this is all we've got. But it may be a lot more useful than you think." He turns away from me, his hands clasped behind his back just over his tail.

"The man we caught sold the pirates' stolen property. He had a fence to make the deals with the pirates and the clients; all he did was handle the money. He didn't have any reason to keep anybody's name around except clients, and he didn't list most of those. He certainly didn't have any reason to keep around the name of someone who was in his position ten years ago.

"Except—" he turns around abruptly, waving a finger in the air—"if she had information he needed as insurance. If her records weren't just lists of clients, but lists of everyone she dealt with.

"Suppose that somehow he knew about these records, and knew they still existed somewhere. If someone in the pirate ring tried to bring him down, all he'd have to do is find those records and he'd bring the rest of them down with him."

"Well, good luck." I fold my arms. What does this have to do with me?

"You have a better chance of finding out where those records are than we do."

"What?"

"You can move through the underworld without attracting that much attention, can't you?" His eyes are bright. "Somebody needs to find out where those records are, and

quite frankly, I don't think the Guard is going to be able to do it before the pirates do."

"Why the *hell* do you think that somebody is going to be me?"

"Because you care about Mr. Brown. And because you know as well as I do that the Guard isn't his problem. If those records aren't found soon, the pirates will kill him, if for no other reason than to make sure he can't tell us where they are. If the good guys don't win this round, he's dead.

"And because helping us would look very good for you right now, Miss Desmera."

Oh, shit.

The stoat looks grimly smug as he continues. "The jailbreak charges are currently suspended. The assault charges that put you in jail, though, are still pending. You broke out before your trial."

"I was dying!"

He shrugs. "The fact that you escaped rather than stand trial could look very bad indeed in the hands of a good prosecutor. And we have very good prosecutors in Raneadhros.

"Of course, those charges were brought against you in a different country in the Empire. Whether or not they're carried forward to Raneadhros depends on whether or not the Guard elects to pursue them."

"All right," I say tightly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Try to find the records, Miss Desmera." He smiles. "All we can ask you to do is try. And to come to us first if you find anything.

"And—to keep an eye on the bear until we can get protection assigned to him. I suspect you'll be a better guardian than anything we can come up with anyway.

"What I would suggest you do is the same thing we're doing. Looking for the fence who worked with Marilyn Brown. And anyone else who might have known her." He tips his hat to me. "We'll be seeing each other again very soon, I'm sure."

After he starts to walk away, I go back in the lighthouse. He is stretched out on the bed, staring at the ceiling, perfectly still, tears running down his face and beginning to soak the pillow. I sit next to him; he doesn't move. So I lay my chest across his, my face against his neck, and hug him. "I'm sorry, John," I whisper.

We lie together, unmoving, for a very long time. ⬇

to be continued

Interlude 2

Toward the evening of the third, and final, day of the journey to Raneadhros, Jack said, "What about Dahlu?"

I folded my arms. "Be specific. Do you mean, do I still love her? Do I care about what's going to happen her now? Do I think I'll ever see her again?"

"Yes."

"Well, then. Yes, to all of them. Even the last one, I think." I sighed. "It was too easy to be angry with her for not understanding me. But when I look back, I realize I was the one who didn't understand me. Up until a few months ago, Dahlu probably understood me better than I did."

"Until you met Revor."

"No." I looked out at the fading sun, resolving that when I got to Raneadhros I'd lose the damned sunup-to-sundown schedule that I'd hated for the years I'd been on it. "Until I started going down to the docks. That was three or four months before I met Revor."

"There's only so much... sameness one person can stand. Everything was becoming so comfortable it hurt. Does that make any sense?"

"A lot of people work most of their lives to be comfortable, kitty."

"So when they get there—if they get there—are they really happy? I had a stable relationship with a nice girl, a job that I could live with, and enough time to pursue art as a hobby. I was probably more comfortable than my parents had ever been."

"And you hated it." Jack nodded. "I suppose I've always been happy being comfortable."

"If that was true, why were you an accomplice to a jailbreak? It's not comfortable work."

He laughed. "No, I guess it isn't."

Silence drifted past us. The soundlessness grew unbearable, so I spoke again. "Dahlu always thought I was closed to her. She never thought I was willing to share feelings, so she'd just guess at them. She was almost always wrong." I chuckled a bit. "But it was as much her as me. Or more so."

"Of course you'd think that," Jack smirked.

"No, that's not it. See, a lot of people spend their lives building walls that no one can get through without permission. They let people in a little at a time, ready to push them all the way back out at a sign of trouble."

"But I don't. When I was a kitten, I was always completely open. By the time I was a teenager I had been stomped enough for it that I had my wall, all right. But people are either fully outside, or fully inside. I don't open up often. But when I do, it's all the way."

"I think that scared Dahlu. She didn't want to learn how to deal with someone who was all the way open, even for just a little bit. Every time I was, I'd say something—make a joke, kid her about a little thing—and her walls went up. I stopped trying over a year ago. It was easier to be cordial acquaintances."

WHOEVER PLANNED THIS KNEW WHAT THEY WERE DOING-- MINEFIELD TO THE FRONT, NARROW PASS TO THE REAR, AND SHEER SLOPES TO EITHER SIDE... AND WAITED TILL WE WERE ALL OUT OF OUR VEHICLES BEFORE MOVING IN. DAMMIT!



OR A 'KON PATROL, LOOKING FOR US, OR CHECKING ON THEIR BUDDIES HERE...



EMPIRES





WELL, I GOT A HANDKERCHIEF... OR
YOU COULD MOON 'EM WITH YOUR CUTE
WHITE NOR'VUUL ASS...

HANKY'LL DO,
SCARLET...



SIR... THEY'RE
WAVING A WHITE
FLAG...



THEY'RE MOTIONING US FORWARD! RAISE
SHRIKE AND OTOTOT, TELL 'EM WE
GOT A POSSIBLE CASUALTY...

GOTCHA.
LET'S GO.



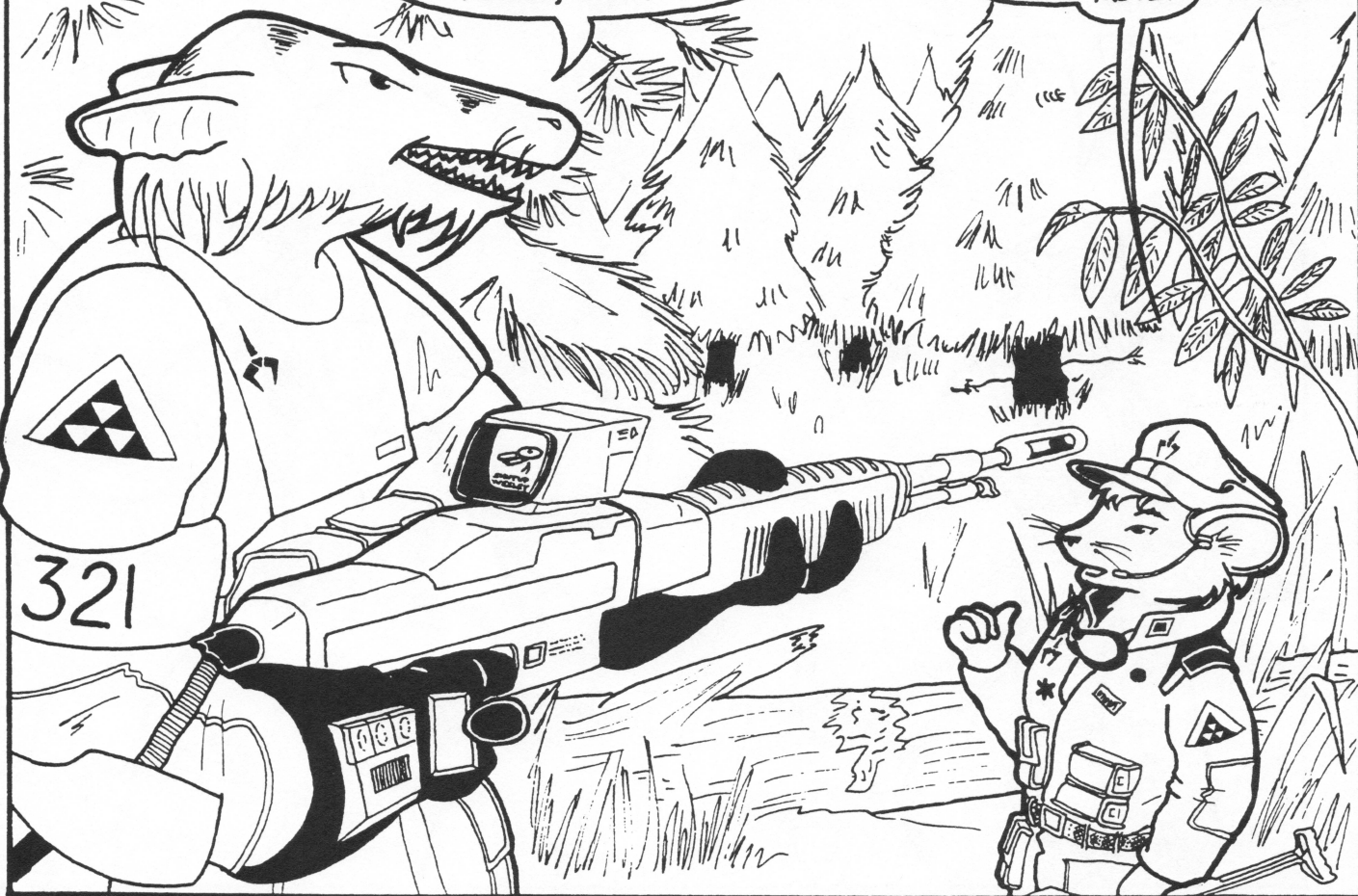
YOU'RE THE GROUP WE'VE BEEN FOLLOWING!
YOU GOT A MEDIC WITH YOU?

YEAH... SHRIKE! OTOYOT! C'MON
OUT, THEY'RE FRIENDLIES!



AR! IS GOOD TO SEE WE NOT
ALONE IN UNFRIENDLY
WORLD, HMM?

SCARLET SAYS ONE OF
THEM IS WOUNDED... LET'S
MOVE!



GLAD TO HAVE YOU WITH US -- WE'VE BEEN TRYING TO CATCH UP FOR A FEW DAYS NOW. I'M LIEUTENANT ARICH KOTLIN, THIS IS SQUAD SERGEANT SIERRA CHENNAUT, TAKING CARE OF CORPORAL KETTERINA BARONA...

SIR... I'M CORPORAL CELON DELSKI, THIS IS LANCE CORPORAL SCARLET ALVAREZ...

SIR...

MEDIC?



"PRIVATE SHRIKE THLEE'VA..."

"...AND SPEC-FIVE SHERSHEN OTOYOT..."

GREETINGS!

HI. WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED HERE? ALVAREZ, COULD YOU CALL AD-8 UP HERE WITH THE VEHICLE?

WHAT... WHO'RE VA...



SHE GOT PUNCHED IN THE ABDOMEN, ABOUT TWENTY MINUTES AGO. HEAVY VAGINAL BLEEDING SINCE. IT'S SLOWED UP A BIT NOW, BUT...

LYING FLAT LIKE THIS AIN'T HELPING. ROLL HER ONTO HER SIDE AND TUCK HER KNEES UP. IT'LL RELAX THE ABDOMINAL MUSCLES.

SIR, IS THERE A BLANKET--A CLEAN ONE--TO PUT UNDER HER? I NEED IT... AND SOME WATER. SCARLET, HELP ME GET HER PANTS AND UNDERWEAR OFF. BE CAREFUL.



OTOYOT EXAMINES BARONA'S INJURY FOR A FEW MINUTES...

BLOODY HELL.

WHAT IS IT?

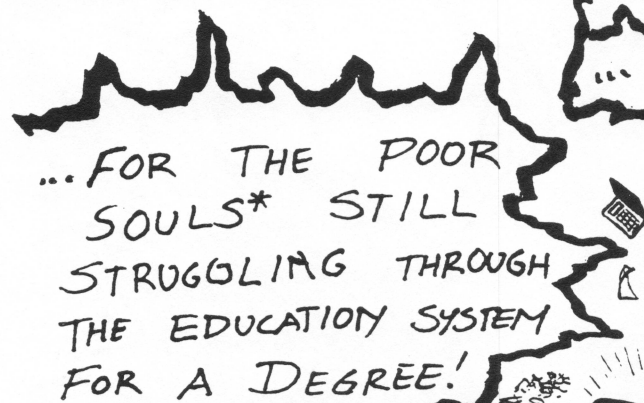
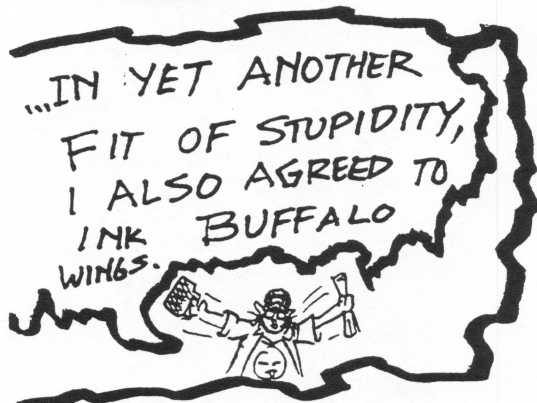
I'M GOING TO HAVE TO DO SOME QUICK SURGERY NOW.

...OR THIS GIRL WILL BLEED TO DEATH.



CONTINUED...





DIPLOMAS:

- 1) LOOK GREAT ON YOUR WALL
- 2) ARE SYMBOLS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT
- 3) MAKE GREAT AIRPLANES BECAUSE OF THE HEAVY STICK THEY'RE PRINTED ON.
- 4) ARE A BETTER MOMENTO OF YOUR COLLEGIATE CAREER THAN A COFFEE MUG OR CAR DECAL.
- 5) BURN

Ocelots Have Spots... to Hide Their Chipware

A Jack Lynch Story
by Clint Warlick

The clouds hadn't made up their minds whether to stop raining or let loose a downpour. Personally, I figured a hard rain would be good for the city — it would get the slime off the streets... the two-legged variety. Right now it was misting, coming down just enough to get things wet. As for me, I needed to get wet on the inside, and a beer at L.J.'s pub looked to be the highlight of the week.

As I stepped into L.J.'s, my pace slackened. The smell of beer and fresh-baked bread was enough to lift anyone's spirits. There weren't many patrons visible, though the sounds of a party came from the back room. As I sat down at the bar, I ran my hand over the wood — real wood — and smiled. L.J.'s was the furthest thing from a "modern bar". No glaring neon, chrome, or technoflash; L.J. believed in three things: real food, real beer, real comfort. Nothing more and nothing less.

Of course, L.J. didn't make money hand over fist, but then again I don't think he cared. The people that came here were not looking to stay "in the mainstream" or "to be seen", but to relax, kick back, and enjoy.

The owner, "Little" John McBride, stood behind the bar, all seven feet of him; huge muscles, bristling beard, wide smile, wider shoulders, hands the size of bear paws, and totally un-augmented. He was the place's crowning touch, not to mention a damn fine cook.

I hadn't said anything yet, but when L.J. turned around, he set a mug of beer in front of me. "You look like an official member of the 'Drowned Rat Society'."

"How did you know I wanted a beer? I could've asked for a shot of bourbon."

"I doubt it. It's mid-week, early afternoon, raining, and you haven't had a case for a while."

I nearly gagged on my beer. "I'm that predictable?"

"No, I'm just that good at reading people." He grinned.

I took another sip and we talked for a while. L.J. and I had been friends for years, ever since I first stumbled across his doorstep, and since there were only a couple of customers, he let the barmaids take care of things while we chewed the fat.

He had just asked me when I thought my next case would be when a figure in a poncho and boots came in out of the rain. The newcomer strode across the room toward the party in back. Just before disappearing, he whipped off the poncho to reveal a furry muzzle and tail.

Not every place served pookas, let alone allowed them in the door. I knew L.J. wasn't prejudiced, but it was the first time I'd seen one there, and he was part of the party in the back room. I turned to ask L.J. about this and saw a look on his face that said his mental gears were turning.

"I've got an idea."

"I know, I could smell the burning rubber."

"I think I know where you could pick up a job," he grinned, "but I need you to help me with a few platters."

Knowing John as long as I have, I didn't think he meant he'd pay me to bus tables. So it was safe to assume he felt that the party with the pooka held something that would interest me and my wallet. Carrying platters wasn't my idea of a foot in the door, but it beat peeping through keyholes.

We went to the kitchen, where the barmaids were about to take out platters heaped with biscuits, breads, steaming meats, and cheeses. L.J. told them he and I would be helping serve. The bodiced barmaids looked a little perplexed but agreed; after all, he was the boss.

Hefting a platter, I followed L.J. to the back room. There I noticed there wasn't just a single pooka, there was a whole batch of them. Cats and coons, skunks and sheep, horses and hounds. There must have been thirty or more, all talking, drinking, and munching away, and paying their respects to the only other human in the room and his charge.

The man was a balding gent, large of build and voice, though not a big as L.J.; he was fighting middle age and winning on points. With the party revolving around him, he reigned over the proceedings like a king holding court, doting on his pooka companion as if she were his royal niece.

She was a female cougar with tawny fur, violet eyes, and a white evening dress. Never straying from his side, she talked, nibbled, and flirted, generally acting the part of a debutante at her coming-out party.

As we set the platters down and saw the food begin to evaporate, I was starting to doubt L.J.'s idea. My chances of crashing this party were about nil: I stuck out like a pair of jeans at a wedding. Then I saw L.J. move toward the gentleman. *Yes!*

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Lawrence?"

"Yes. You can introduce your friend over there," he said, pointing toward me.

No! As much as I wanted a job, I felt my heart skip a beat. Everything clicked at once. This wasn't just any man named Lawrence, this was *Mister* Lawrence. A powerful man who worked both sides of the law, though no one could prove it. Rumor mill had it that he was the closest thing pookas, kappas, and other constructs had to a patron saint. Backing out now might be the better part of common sense.

Needless to say, I stepped into the bear trap.

"The name is Jack Lynch. I'm a private investigator." I put out my hand. He shook it with a firm grip, the type to let you know who's in charge.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Lynch. Pleased to meet you."

Little John turned and left for the front, leaving me to sink or swim as I pleased.

Mr. Lawrence put his arm around the cougar and introduced her. "This is Connie. She has just gotten her citizenship today, and as you might have guessed this is her 'coming-out' party." He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, saying, "I'll be back in a moment."

He nodded toward the front and we walked from the din of the party. Grabbing a booth, he settled in.

"Business must be slow for you, Mr. Lynch," he smirked, "for you to be waiting tables. However, it is a good thing that Mr. McBride introduced you to me. Although now is not the time to discuss the matter, I have need of a man of your services. If you would come by my offices tomorrow we may come to an arrangement. As for now, feel free to join the party. I must be heading back to it myself." He handed me his card, got up and returned to the party.

I sat there for a while turning this over in my mind, remembering what little I could about Lawrence. There wasn't much: money, power, rumors, half-truths, and shadows were about it. With little to go on, I decided to at least hear him out. I could always say no. Either way, I paid my bar tab and joined the party.

• • •

There was a cold nose and warm breath on my shoulder. A soft, furry arm was draped over my chest and a velvet thigh lay across my leg. Waking up with someone is usually a drowsy, pleasant feeling, but that cold nose cut through my mental haze like a knife.

Sue was a rather pretty red fox I'd met at the party last night. We'd hit it off rather well and, after the party started to break up, she told me that Connie — who was her roommate — was going to have a small party afterward at their place and that she was rather partied out. I offered her a place to crash at my flat, half expecting her to conk out on the couch. Needless to say I was pleasantly surprised.

I slid out from beneath the sheets and grabbed my robe from the chair. It was raining hard outside and the floor was cold, so I headed for the office to turn up the thermostat. When I

turned on the light, my jaw hit the floor. Someone had gone through my office. I wasn't that parties unknown had trashed my place while I slept. No, it was worse... my office had been cleaned.

I stood there dumbstruck for a few seconds, just standing in the doorway. A sleepy voice from the bed asked, "What's wrong?"

I didn't turn to answer, afraid that the tidiness would vanish like a mirage. I did, however, ask the sixty-four dollar question.

"Did you clean up my office?"

"Yes." She sounded slightly amused. "After you fell asleep last night, I was still a little wired, so I started to put a couple of things away. Before I knew it, I was almost done, so I finished."

I walked around the office, seeing what she'd wrought. It wasn't so much all put away as straightened. Files in the filing cabinet, coats on the rack, empties in the wastebasket, notes on the board. I could actually find things.

Sue was now leaning against the door in a silk kimono I had from an old girlfriend. "Ah... thank you. What do I owe you?"

"Breakfast?"

We walked down to a nearby diner before heading over to Lawrence's. I told Sue about my cleaning lady, who'd quit about a year ago. She laughed, saying that she had probably been buried under all the loose paperwork. We got a dirty look from the waitress, and were seated in the back, away from her table. Suited me fine — I knew she was a lousy waitress.

Over a breakfast I found out Sue was a secretary, working for Lawrence until she could find some "real" work. Considering that I could use someone to do legwork and take calls for me, and that I had lost too many potential cases lately from hackers hitting my E-mail, I thought this was a interesting coincidence. I wanted to talk to Lawrence before doing anything, though. Coincidences for me are too often planned.

We caught the crosstown trolley for Lawrence's. On board we got a few stares. Although pookas are common enough, you usually don't see one paired off with a human outside of high-price sex-toys. An old lady with a "God Loves" button called me a "pervert" and a "degenerate". I shut her up by sticking my tongue out at her.

• • •

"Good of you to make it, Mr. Lynch. Would you care for anything to drink?"

"Coffee, black. Thank you."

"Coffee for Mr. Lynch and iced Earl Grey for me, Kirin."

"Yes, Mister Lawrence."

The Siamese cat secretary that had escorted me in left and closed the double doors behind her.

"Mr. Lynch, now that you're here, I can tell you why I have need of your services." He handed me a file containing photographs and a case history on a female pooka. An ocelot, fully grown and about three years out of the tank. She'd had extensive cranial surgery, what looked like a "meat-bop-button" or "puppet-plug" installed behind her left ear, and possibly something else. I didn't like it but I'd seen it before. Slightly illegal, unless of course you had a license.

"She belongs to a certain Colombian businessman, or at least she used to. Two days ago she was riding through Oakland in an armored limo. The car was hit by a gang or gangs yet unknown, and she and the contents of the car were taken. The driver and the other passengers were left for dead. I haven't been able to get any more information. I would like her found, Mr. Lynch."

"What's she to you, if I may ask?"

Lawrence gave me the look of a man of conviction. "I dislike slavery and abuse, Mr. Lynch. Even though the law states she is the property of someone else, I want to see justice served and her set free of her captors."

"You're just being a good Samaritan, then?"

"You might say that," he said with a wicked grin. "I would also like Mr. Ortega to be in my debt, as they say."

The coffee and tea arrived. I took a sip of steaming Java and let things percolate through my mind. Lawrence wanted a bargaining chip against Ortega. Ortega's men would probably be out looking, as would the police, according to the file. That part of Oakland was home of some of the nastier and more bizarre gangs. And there was something else about that pooka that didn't strike me right. To top it all off, I needed a case.

"All right. I'll take the case."

"Good. You can make the financial arrangements with Miss Kirin."

We shook hands. As I turned to go, I stopped and asked, "I understand that Sue — the red fox I met at the party — she's looking for work as a secretary."

"I believe so, yes."

"I want to know if you asked her to go home with me."

Lawrence's eyes narrowed for a moment, but he didn't let his anger show. "No, Mr. Lynch, that's not my style or my right."

Something inside told me he was telling the truth. Doing what I do, I have a tendency to trust my instincts.

"Good. I'd like to hire her."

"Really? Why?" he asked with a suspicious look.

"While I was asleep, she cleaned my office and organized my files. Anyone who can do that much that quick and that well

I think is worth hiring."

I tried not to let my embarrassment show, but Lawrence chortled quietly. "All right. I'll let her know."

I closed the door behind me, then talked dollars with the Siamese. Outside the rain had stopped but the clouds hung, threatening. It seemed proper, considering the start of this case.

• • •

Rich Powell is one of the Bay Area's finest, the first pooka cop to make detective. I've known the wolf since he was a rookie, and we've helped each other out from time to time. Right now I needed more info on what and who had happened to that limo.

"The gang that did this was nasty. The car was stripped... not a clean job, though. Car and passengers beaten and slashed. The muscle boys 'n' the driver were DOA. The suit's over at St. Mary's in an ICU, but the doctors say he should be coming out of his coma soon."

"Any sign of the girl?"

Rich grimaced, "Nothing yet. I really pity her. That part of Oakland is a cesspool. You've got Crypts, Punks, Death Rockers, Gothics, Vampires, and God knows what else. The M.O. looks like either Gothics or Vamps. If she's alive, she must be going through hell."

Rich knew a lot of the horrors that people did to semi-humans. Before constructs were legally recognized as having the same rights as humans, Rich had been owned, body and soul, by some rich family; he was part of the security detail. When pookas and all were given the opportunity for citizenship, and the rights it offered, he promptly applied. And was just as promptly thrown out on the street. For six months he was on the skids, living day to day, and trying to keep out of the reach of Beastie Bashers.

He managed to pull himself out of that hole and join the Police Academy. Graduated top ten of his class. Got a commendation for bravery. And managed to fill the shoes of detective when the Chief of Police promoted him for political reasons. For all the hype the department's played up about him, he still has all the passions of anyone else. I got him drunk and calmed him down when the genetics firms announced they had managed to engineer all new pookas with a seven-year lifespan. He nearly quit the force over that. As it is right now, he puts in a lot of overtime when a case involving a semi-human is involved.

"So, Jack, why the interest? Looking to get your throat slit?"

"No, I've been hired to find her. A 'Good Samaritan' is footing the bill."

"You mean...?"

"Yep, he even has a file on her."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope, I've got it here. Take a look." I handed him the folder. "I'll get us some coffee."

Normally I wouldn't be so lax about getting out of arm's reach of such a file, but I knew I was going to need a favor from Rich, and he was going to need a cup to keep his teeth from grinding. An abused pooka is bad enough — he sees it every day. But a fur-bop has a tendency to strike a nerve.

A "fur-bop" or "meat-bop" is someone who has a number of control devices surgically installed in the brain to adjust threshold levels of pain, pleasure, hunger, sex drive, and the like. These can be controlled via a interface, a "puppet-plug". Technically, to use one you must be properly certified, but I'm sure you know the name of that tune.

I came back with the coffee just in time. The Patented Powell Jaw Clench had just taken hold. He looked up, took the coffee, and downed it all at once. He snarled, shuddered, and said, "I hate it without cream and sugar."

Getting the forensics report was no problem. Keeping hold of my lunch while reading it was. The car had been hit by what looked like a small harpoon anchored by chain to something solid. This had torn the doors off and sent the car spinning. Some of the passengers were thrown free. A nasty job had been done with razors and then the car and bodies stripped. No sign of the ocelot. No neon signs saying, "Me, I did it," but I wasn't expecting any. Rich managed to get a copy of the coroner's photos for me and told me to keep my head down. I didn't know who had the girl, but I knew where to go to find out.

• • •

The Dark Garden was a Gothic club just on the border of Oakland. The name said it all: *dark*. Dim lights, dark, moody music, and equally dark and moody patrons. The only bright spots were the glint of chrome and steel, and very little of that. I changed my clothes to gray jeans and jacket before heading here. A suit in this place could be hazardous to my health. A 9mm and a Kevlar vest underneath made me feel better about walking into this lion's den.

The bartender was either a bald, flat-chested woman of about thirty or a bald and skinny man in his early twenties. The voice was equally androgynous and sounded like a rasp on dry leather. I ordered a beer, the safest thing I could think of, and asked if anyone knew anything about the limo that was hit.

"Lady Brigitte would be who you need to talk to. I have to run this place."

I understood what that meant. Trying to mix drinks while a ghoulie tried to bite your face off — literally — would probably be annoying. "So where do I find Lady Brigitte?" The bartender pointed over to a corner booth, one with red curtains for privacy. I paid my tab and walked on over.

Before I touched the drapes, a voice from inside said, "Enter freely, and of your own will." Inside was obviously a private booth. Dim light was cast from the wrought iron lamps, and

red satin walls and black Naugahyde seats surrounded a mahogany table. Opposite me was a woman who gave new to the term 'Vamp' — a beautiful woman of regal stature whose white hair framed a soft, pale face. Her taste in fashions was elegance of over 200 years ago, and she had the violet eyes of a hungry predator.

She gracefully motioned me to a seat next to her and asked, "How may I be of assistance?"

"I need information on who made a hit on a certain limo in Oakland."

"Oh, an intrepid adventurer. Daring to stalk the dark streets of the night. Can you tell me when this took place, and where?"

I handed her the forensics file and filled her in on what I knew. She listened intently, waiting for me to finish. She then looked at me for a moment, as if sizing up a grand fool, and said, "Do you love life so little as to walk into the jaws of hell?"

"What?"

"I know which 'tribe' did this. They call themselves the 'Cenobites' and style themselves as such."

"Do you know where I can find them?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And I think you should go home and tell your client that the girl your looking for is dead."

I felt my heart sink. "They killed her?"

"No, but where she is you will never be able to get her out."

"Doesn't matter. I still have to try."

"Why?"

Why indeed? I felt strongly about this case from the beginning. It wasn't the money, or the chance at some big time contacts. It wasn't just that she was a pooka being used as a chip in some high price poker game.

"She's a little girl who's been used and abused by anyone and everyone. I can't just give up, and I won't give in."

Brigitte looked deep into my eyes, as if trying to read my soul. "I believe you. Even without my help, you might find them anyway and cause my people some serious annoyance. So, I will help you. But first we seal the bargain."

I was ready for anything — money, contract, handshake, kinky sex — but not what happened. She brought out a fine crystal glass, and filled it with red wine. Then with a needle she pricked her finger and let a drop fall into the glass.

"And now you." She took my hand in a grip that felt like velvet-covered steel, and repeated the procedure with my thumb. She then sipped the wine and offered me the glass.

Hesitantly, I took it and downed the mixture.

"You now belong to me. No one else may take you."

"Right." I had no *idea* what she was taking about. She then gave me the information I was looking for and then kissed me lightly on the lips. Another time and place, it might have been more involving and interesting, but I didn't have the nerve right then.

• • •

When I got back to the office, Sue was busy on my PC. As I changed clothes she filled me in on what had happened since the morning.

"Detective Richard Powell called. He said that the suit in the hospital is out of a coma, but is about as coherent as a soup sandwich. No more on the girl, but he said he's looking."

"Good. A little late, but good."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"Mr. Lawrence was asking for an update."

"It's only been a couple of days!"

"True, but he expects the impossible."

"Grumble."

"...And I found a tap on your line. Some second-rate hacker was redirecting your phone calls randomly, so I took it off line. It's clear now."

"Thanks. Anything else?"

"Yes. Is detective Powell as cute as he sounds?"

I had to laugh at this one. "I don't know. He's a grizzled, gray wolf, and a damn good cop. He keeps in shape, he's 'bout five foot eleven, and he has big brown eyes." I could see her eyes sparkle then. "And he's married."

"Very married?"

"Uh huh."

"Blast!"

I had to laugh. I gave her a hug and kissed her on the forehead. This case was getting grim and twisted and I needed a touch of reality. It was getting dark and I didn't want to tempt fate by heading into Oakland at night. I sent Sue home and told her to come by early tomorrow for the drive into Oakland. Stretched out on the bed, I kept thinking that the clock was ticking and I had an appointment in the depths of Hell.

• • •

Lady Brigitte had said that the Cenobites were hidden well

within the sewers, though she wasn't sure as to the exact location. What made these nut-bars tick was Clive Barker, heavy drugs, black leather, knives, dark-twisted sex, and the "Labyrinth of Hell".

The Gates of Hell are an access tunnel leading from the flood canals to the main storm drains. The gates were originally padlocked when they were installed around the turn of the century. Big joke. They got their name when several bodies were found just inside and above them was painted, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here!" They never caught the murderer, but my bet is any psycho who reads Danté would be hard to catch. Anyway, the word on the street was that only the crazy or stupid would head down there. I don't know which I qualify as, but that's why they pay me the big bucks.

I was taking precautions though: boots, kevlar, my 4-cell mag-light, and plenty of heat. Not twenty yards in the smell of rot and wet stone was enough to make me gag, but after the first hour I could breath normally, sort of.

There are maps of the sewer system — all nice, neat, and safe in the city planners' office, where it would take a court order from God and twelve sticks of dynamite to blast a copy loose. Besides, even though there are maps, they are not complete by any stretch of the term. Rebuilds, new accesses, lost and forgotten tunnels, and even "privately built" tunnels, had never been etched down onto the hallowed papers of the city officials.

Needless to say I used chalk arrows to mark the route out.

About noon I was wishing I had brought a lunch, then was grateful I hadn't. The body was not more than a couple of hours old. It took me a while to figure out it was a human. Even though the rats had done a good job on it, they haven't gotten up to the point of removing all the skin from the their supper before they dined. I had a bad feeling I was on the right track. Whoever it was had met up with the Cenobites and been an unwilling guest. Nasty.

I was straightening up when a woman stepped around the corner about ten feet in front of me, bold as brass. She, and I use the term loosely, was pale, bald as an egg, and wore more leather and metal than fifteen punkers. I could see several knives on her body, and the look on her face of a cat sizing up a mouse.

I drew my gun more on instinct than anything else, even though I was white-knuckling the mag-light like a club. I wanted more leverage if things went bad.

"I'm looking for a pooka, an ocelot... that's a cat with lots of spots."

"We know, Mister Lynch. We have been waiting for you."

Things just got bad.

I never saw who clubbed me with the chain. I just saw the lady Cenobite smile sweetly when the lights went out.

• • •

There was no light, and I couldn't move. The air was hot and wet and smelled of leather. I tried to thrash about and yell, and nearly deafened myself. A short while later I felt hands on me, and then my hood was removed. I've never been into leather restraints — they're no fun and not practical — but my captors had other ideas. When my eyes finally focused, I found myself bound to a wooden frame. A bald girl (not the same one) was sitting on a pile of pillows studying me. She was wearing some tight-fitting black fabric and about a dozen or so silver rings — ears, nose, fingers and whatever. The room was stone, painted grey and black with leather wall hangings and a number of knives. Pillows and blankets were scattered across the floor; on top of one was the reason I had gone on this fool's quest.

Lying there... check that, *writhing* there was the ocelot, obviously having more fun than I was. No one was touching her, but I could see that she had a cable leading from a small laptop computer to behind her left ear.

I turned my head toward the girl and tried to speak. Speak I did not; drool, slobber, and make odd noises I managed. This was about the time I realized that I had a headache like a German drum major pounding on a keg of dynamite. So I rebooted my mouth to start over. However, the girl smiled at me, got up, and pulled out a long knife. Knowing that I was not in Kansas anymore, I was worried. She lightly raked the tip of the blade across my chest, and then drew it back to make the plunge.

I'll have you know that I was not worried. Scared, yes; worried, no; but what I was mostly was pissed off. Don't ask me why, I'm still not sure. So instead of screaming, or begging for mercy, I roared.

"Who in hell do you think you are?!"

As it stands, this is what saved my life, for the moment. Her face went blank, and she took a step back and blinked. Realizing I had done the right thing, I gave her a withering stare. She then nodded her head, turned, and padded out of the room.

A short time later three "people" came in. One was the original lady from the tunnel, the other might have been a hairless gorilla, and the third was a thin, reedy type with circuit boards tattooed on his head. All of them looked like they ate babies for breakfast.

"So," said the woman, "you're alive and well."

"No thanks to that girl you left in here."

"Camilla? She was to attend to your needs."

"Riiight. It makes perfect sense." I had no idea on this one.

She grinned and answered, "If you had screamed, begged for mercy, or fainted, she would have slowly carved designs on you. As it is, you're to be saved for ... other sport." She ran her hands over some interesting areas of my anatomy, kissed me full on the mouth, and then as she pulled back she bit me on

the lower lip. "One must have pain in pleasure, pleasure in pain, Mr. Lynch."

"Bitch," I spat.

The gorilla bellowed, "PAIN!" and hit me square in the chest.

"Saul, no! Bad boy, Saul, bad. Mr. Lynch is our guest."

"KILL! BREAK! PAIN!"

"No, Saul. Not yet; he belongs to Lady Brigitte. We must pay her for him."

"No?" he said with a trembling lip.

"Maybe later." She patted him on the back and had him stand by the door, his eyes never leaving me.

Circuit Head had been oblivious to all of this, bent over the laptop. He then got very excited about something and turned around. "Dion, come over here. I've cracked the code." Dion — the first woman — made her way across the room. Circuit Head started explaining to her what was going on, totally oblivious to me. For once I was truly grateful for being ignored. It seemed that the puppet-plug in the ocelot was a lot more than original hardware. Someone had hooked up a small memory space alongside it, capable of storing all sorts of interesting secrets, such as "...hallucinogenic endorphins, better quality than I've seen in years."

"How much would the street price be?"

"Ten times that of what we're dealing with now."

"Interesting," Dion purred. She turned away from Circuit Head and must have realized they had spilled everything in my hearing. She shot a glance of pure venom at me. "Don't trouble yourself, Mr. Lynch. You'll be staying with us for the rest of your life. And once we buy you from Lady Brigitte, that won't be long." With that she and the other Cenobites left the room.

• • •

The great thing about wood is that it breaks. Steel bends, plaster crumbles, and stone doesn't do beans. But being left trussed up in a wooden frame does give one a chance of getting out. As it was, I had been rocking back and forth for about twenty minutes. While it was hard to move, the leather bonds had just enough give to let me pull each way. What gave was the bottom of the frame, that and my left shoulder. I fell over onto a mass of pillows, thankful they cushioned my fall and the noise. With the bottom board gone it was merely hard instead of impossible to undo the straps. My clothes were nowhere in sight but I managed to scavenge a pair of leather pants — modesty, you know — and get to the pooka.

She was sound asleep; going from agony to ecstasy and back thirty times an hour does that to a body. I threw her over my right shoulder, since the left one felt like it was on fire, and headed out of the room. Now, dashing through the sewers, dodging homicidal maniacs, carrying 120 pounds of dead weight, and having pain jolt through you with every step is

not my idea of a good time. However, if that is the only game in town, go for the gold.

I had no idea which way I was going, but I was determined to get there *fast*. It had been too long since the Cenobites had left me, and I had no desire for a reunion, especially if they had managed to buy me from Lady Brigitte. I may be a good sport, but I don't intend to *be* good sport.

Like I said earlier, the sewers and access tunnels under the city form a bizarre maze. The Cenobites had decorated it in their own creepy style: chain curtains over doorways, wooden doors leading to nowhere, artificial thorn vines, you get the general idea. Any way looked good, so I took the left-hand route. This got me back to where I had started in about fifteen minutes. All right, try curtain number two.

Black sackcloth and chains covered the way. Pushing through slowly, they only made church bells seem quiet. This did rouse one of the occupants inside. She propped herself up on one elbow and stared at me. My heart stopped. She gave me the grin of a hungry wolf and reached out—and up. Hanging from a hook on a chain was a hunk of greasy red meat. She took a bite and chewed it with great relish. I nearly gagged until I saw it was salami. Licking her lips, she settled down on the pillows next to the other unconscious forms. She was stoned, thank God. I then crept quietly through the room full of semi-nude bodies. Beyond was a long hallway. It looked better than what was behind me, so I set off running.

I was doing a good clip when Circuit Head rounded the corner. He obviously didn't expect me. So, not stopping, I tossed him the girl, then nailed him with a right cross. He caught her like a champ and went down like a sack of potatoes. My luck still holding, I picked her up and headed off down the tunnel, leaving laughing boy out cold.

I felt my luck running out when I hear the all too-familiar voice of Saul bellowing "KILL!" from behind. The Cenobites must have found my exit and come looking. Not wanting to discuss sociopolitical ramifications with Saul, I ran hellbent for leather. Just as I was getting my second wind, I was hit in the face with a blast of fetid air. I was back in the sewers, and nothing smelled so good. Twenty yards away, light streamed through a manhole cover. I was home free.

Then Camilla came into view, followed by a large number of black shapes. I was a dead duck. I spun to see Saul coming up from the rear, murderous glee in his beady eyes. Stuck between death and damnation I had no idea what to do. Fortunately for me, someone else did.

"Lynch! Hit the dirt!"

That being the best idea around, I did. The police, led by Camilla, opened up on Saul without so much as a "Freeze", "Halt", or "Buy me donuts, creep!" For this I am thankful. He still managed to walk forward a few steps before dropping. I pity the coroner who would have to make out the report.

Looking up after the firing had ceased, I saw Lady Brigitte holding onto Camilla. I learned later that she had called the cops while Camilla and she were haggling over my price.

Brigitte had come along to keep the girl from leading the cops on a wild goose chase. Anyway, the boys in blue helped me up and out of the sewer.

The ocelot and I were both taken to the hospital, and our statements taken. I hadn't dislocated my shoulder like I thought, just bruised the hell out of it. I also learned that the police had nabbed most of the Cenobites. Dion, however, wasn't one of them. Two days later I was released and on my way to see Mister Lawrence.

"It seems you had quite an adventure, Mr. Lynch," he commented over his iced tea.

"All done and wrapped up in a neat package so as you don't get your hands dirty."

"You seem upset, Mr. Lynch. Isn't your pay large enough?"

"The pay is fine. It's you that pisses me off. You knew that pooka had the recipe for a new designer drug. You saw your chance to make a grab and get it on the streets first. You didn't care if she was a pooka, just a courier with a load of valuables."

Lawrence heard me out, sipped his tea, and sighed. "Mr. Lynch, part of what you say is true. I did know she was carrying the formula. I won't deny that. However, on the rest you are quite wrong. I don't deal in drugs, or any other poison. I had met the girl at a party once, at which she was part of the 'entertainment'. Using anyone that way sickens me, so I kept an eye on her. And when my sources told me of what had happened and what she was carrying, I saw my chance and hired you.

"Originally I was going to give Mr. Ortega back his formula in exchange for the ocelot, and have the authorities in on the trade. But having her go straight to the police worked just as well. As it stands, Mr. Ortega's operations will be crippled for a while, due to police raids. It was rather foolish of him to encode their locations with the formula. And as it stands, when the girl is up for adoption, I intend to sponsor her."

I mulled it over. Pretty convincing. But still... "Do you really expect me to believe this?"

"It doesn't matter what you believe, Mr. Lynch. It's the truth."

• • •

On the way home I realized he was right. No one acts that cool when things go that wrong. I got to my office just as the rain was starting to come down. Sue was sitting behind the desk, talking to someone on the phone and scribbling down some notes. She hung up as I closed the door.

"Who was that?"

"Another case — a Kappa accused of killing her boyfriend."

The rain was washing the slime from the streets, and business was picking up. ☔



33

Sundance

a Wormholes story
written and illustrated by Dave Bryant

"Speed, which becomes a virtue when it is found in a horse, by itself has no advantages." — El Ghazali

• • •
Pan-Colonial Air Races
Pillars of Allah Desert
The Westmark, Unity
3 September 2149 T-standard

"Fer Chrissake, Jilly, stand still!" Monty, my pit crew chief, clenched his teeth in annoyance, nearly amputating the cigar that seemed to wander of its own accord across his mouth.

"Sorry, boss. But..." I shrugged. He nodded wearily and continued the body mapping. I could tell he wasn't shamming — he was too tired even to object to being called "boss". I tried harder to contain my excitement and the shivers and twitches it caused.

The Pan-Colonial. The big time. Only Reno on Earth was bigger, and almost nobody outside Sol system ran in those. I could still hardly believe that my name was on the pilots' roster, especially after the static we'd gotten from the race officials when they caught wind of what we had in mind.

Still trying to imitate a spread-eagled statue, I glanced out of the corner of my eye at my plane. Yep. Still there. Mirror-bright alloy alternated with jet-black composite on the giant boomerang that lay under the techs' loving inspection. If this worked.... It'd be the biggest sports coup since the Australians grabbed the America's Cup with their radical new 12-meter design more than one hundred sixty years ago. And it'd do the same thing to air racing that the Aussies' boat did to sail racing.

If it didn't work, my chance at a career was shot. If it

didn't work badly enough, my life was shot. I shivered again, from apprehension this time, and earned another scolding.

• • •
We had time for another complete simulation run before they called us out to the flight line. Everything worked like a dream, but still, it *was* just a sim. Humans've used them for well onto a couple of centuries, and I think they still aren't comfortable with them. I don't think they ever will be.

Monty and I had the same well-rehearsed argument we always had before any flight. "Dammit, girl, you've gotta wear a flight suit."

"Boss, you *know* it's too baggy. Unbalanced drag, loss of speed, loss of agility..."

"Road rash. And don't call me 'boss'."

"I wouldn't get road rash, Monty. I'd be street pizza. There's no point —"

"Safety regs."

"All they said was helmet and heat-boots. And I'll wear the half-gloves too. The suit's just too hot."

His tone dropped to a growl. "Exhibitionist."

I giggled at his unexpected rejoinder, with which he'd obliquely admitted defeat. But there was a grain of truth to it too.

I walked out behind the crew as it wheeled the tarp-shrouded wing out to the official inspection area. They hardly gave me a glance, having watched me fly dozens of times. But the other ground crewmen and pilots, and the VIP spectators and race officials, goggled or tried not to look like they were goggling.

I'm not particularly pretty, just tall and average-looking with a dancer's flat muscles. Small tits and hips and shoulder-length dirty-blond hair. They could judge it all for themselves: All I wore, and all I intended to wear, were the things I'd ticked off for Monty. Safety helmet, mostly to streamline my head (it looked more like a bicycle helmet with a face shield), friction gloves, and heat-resistant boots to protect my feet from my plane's jetwash.

The hot, dry desert air crackled with static electricity, fluffing my thin pelt. It was uncomfortable, but more bearable than a sweat-sticky flight suit would be. My button nose pad was assailed by the plastic and metallic smells of the airstrip, and my pointed, mostly human ears rang with the high-decibel whines and rumbles of jet and prop engines. I grumbled to myself. My parents never would tell me just where the semihuman in the woodpile was in my ancestry, but I'd often wished to show either more or fewer animal traits.

Mobile ears, for instance, I could flatten against the noise. On the other hand, even the sparse fur I had could be a real hassle sometimes. I sighed. You just can't win. At least I didn't have a tail.

"Jillian Mendez?" The shout broke into my thoughts, and I realized that I had reached the staging area. One of the officials approached me somewhat awkwardly, obviously unsure how to deal with a nude female pilot. I leaned toward him to hear better, grinning as he cleared his throat nervously.

"Your, ah, plane is rather, well, irregular." The poor guy was taking refuge behind his impersonal authority-figure role.

"What's irregular about it? It's under 200 kilos with me on it and it can land in less than 100 meters. Those're the rules for delimited ultralights, right?" I knew they were, but I'd entered the ritualized world of the bureaucrat, where everything has to be said out loud.

"But it's jet-powered. And it has no seat or safety straps. Where do you propose to sit?" He'd taken to shaking his clipboard at me.

I batted at it when it prodded a little too close to one breast. "It has straps. They're on recessed retractor-reels. And I'll be lying down on it — I've got handgrips and foot-wells. As for the jet... the rules don't specify power plant, do they?"

He blinked and tried another tack. "I didn't see any control stick or pedals."

I rolled my eyes in exasperation, then turned my head, sweeping back the hair from my ear. "I'll be controlling it directly." I pointed at the small female plug that gleamed

between the guard hairs on my neck behind the corner of my jaw. Cyberjacks aren't exactly universal, but I expected better than the walleyed look he gave me.

"You're from Camelot, aren't you? I should've known from the fur." Sooner or later, it seems, *everybody* says that. I counted monkeys in my head.

"No. I am not from Camelot. I was born and raised on Unity, all right? This small talk is all very pleasant, thank you very much, but can we get on with it?" My temper was getting the better of me. Not good.

He sighed, aggrieved. "Oh, very well. I don't mind telling you, though, Ms. Mendez, that your vehicle is only in this event because no regulation could be found that would prevent its entry. The same goes for your state of undress."

"I love you too, dear." I blew him a kiss as I strolled toward my still-covered pony, which by now had been weighed, tested, measured, and scrutinized twice as hard as any of the other entrants. It was last in line, its low silhouette contrasting sharply with the ungainly-looking fabric-and-tubing conventional high-performance ultralights whose pilots threw uneasy glances at the strange intruder lurking in their midst.

Being last suited me fine. It'd be more dramatic that way. One way or the other.

One by one, the others rolled down the tarmac, hopping into the air like a series of drunken silkwings. The ultralight competition was a little different from its larger-scale relatives. One of my sponsors had commented, rather unkindly I thought, that it reminded him of the difference between miniature golf and the real thing. (He only gave us the money because it was a much smaller investment than "the real thing".)

The track consisted of several obstacle courses designed to test the planes' maneuverability and the pilots' reflexes. They were separated by long, straight speed runs. You couldn't just be fast, and you couldn't just be agile. The trophy went to the pilot who clocked the fastest time while *accurately* following the twists and slaloms.

Finally, my number was up. The ground men pulled the quick releases, which simultaneously whipped the tarp off and tripped the ignitions. I leaped onto the wing's broad back as the fans spooled up, then buckled the safety harness around my waist. Laying flat on my belly against the warm rubberized mat that passed for a pilot's position, I popped the black-and-blaze-orange access door ahead and to starboard of my right hand. The coil-cable underneath came readily to hand, and I felt the crackle of mental static as the cool metal plug came to life inside my neck when I plugged it in. *Sundance* came to life.

I flexed and rotated the 3-d main exhausts under the swallowtail, finally vectoring them and all the auxiliary vents for a vertical lift. It drank fuel at a breathtaking rate, but we were interested in speed, not endurance, for a relatively short run like this. I shot into the sky in a high arc, hollering with delight as I did every time.

My horizon grew as I climbed, and I could pick out the course pylons and the buzzing insects of the other contestants. The buttes and mesas of the Pillars of Allah towered over them, forming natural barriers around which the planners had plotted a fiendish racecourse. My mind's eye, assisted by the on-board robot brain, superimposed a highlighted and captioned graphic image of my planned course and speed through the entire event. "Follow the yellow brick road," I muttered to myself as the sleek delta wing free-fell into forward flight.

With a shudder, the fans spun from idle to full in an eyeblink, and the old flying wing shot like an artillery shell down the first straight. Two gees, my internal HUD told me. No problem. I keyed on the music.

The plane I flew was half again as old as I, having been built for the Camelotian Army's Expeditionary Force as a reconnaissance robot. It survived the Colonial War and was seconded to Hatikvah's *Zahal*. They weren't exactly sure what to do with it, since it had been designed to serve with a military force built from the ground up to take maximum advantage of cyber-technology. So after pulling all the pure military hardware, they finally sold it (and all the others they had) to companies and agencies who wanted an obsolete but still usable reconbot.

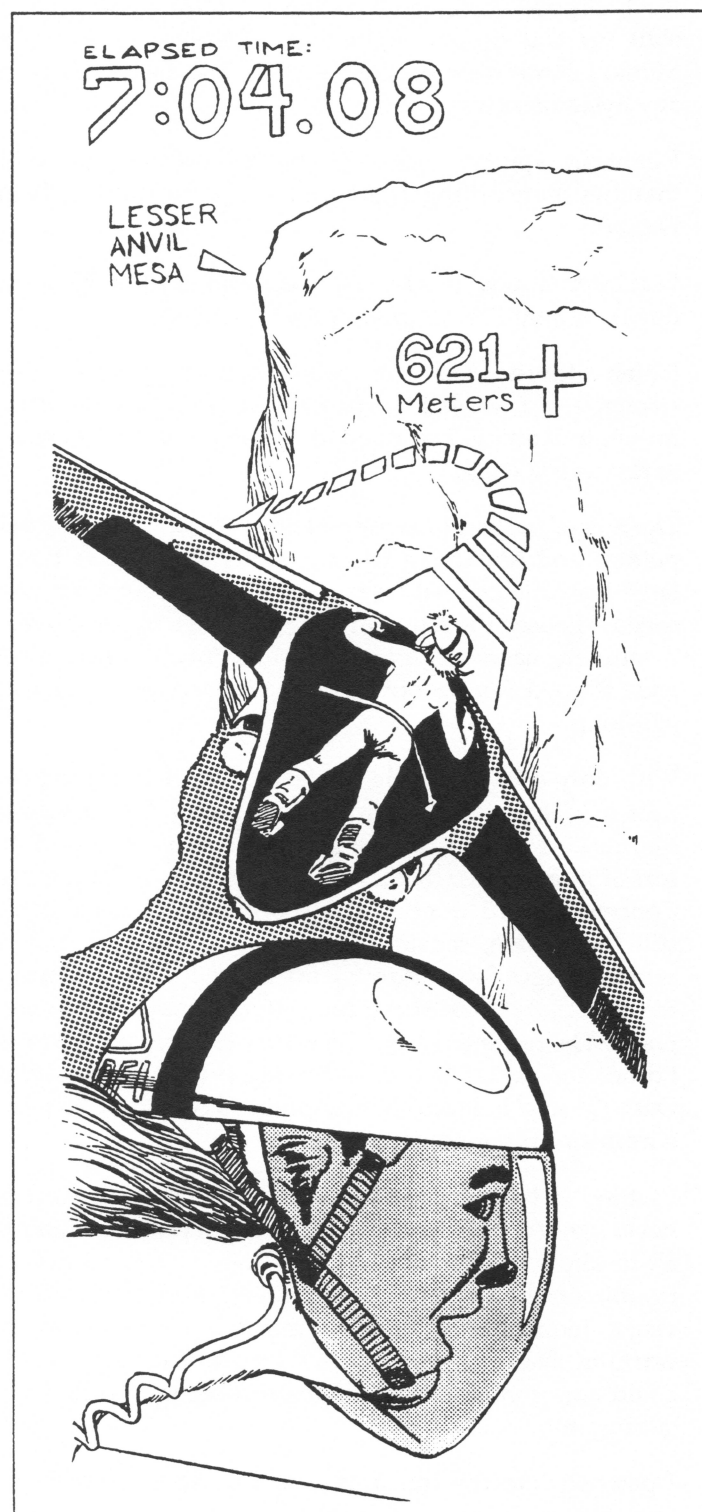
That was how I got mine. I don't know exactly where I got the idea, except for a dim childhood memory of a scene from an old pre-colonial animated film. A girl riding on a flying wing. It seemed like the closest thing to the freedom of real flying, with the wind rushing through my fur. And that was the real reason I wouldn't wear a flight suit.

The music came up, pulsing through my blood, telling me the wing was flying fine, all green. It changed slightly to match my mood, but stayed steady and upbeat. If anything went wrong, the music would turn urgent and more menacing. It was like a soundtrack for real life. I loved it. Monty hated it.

I passed the rearmost contestants like a meteor, heading into the first set of pylons. More than just the music sang in my head. I felt complete as my mind controlled the sleek airfoil under me just the way I'd move my own arms and legs. The robot brain gathered data from its internal and external sensors, processed it, and fed it to me as kinesthetic, visual, and audio impressions. After months of practice, reacting to the steady stream of sensory information had become almost instinctive.

I stood *Sundance* on a wingtip and flung out the airbrakes, rotating the exhausts to reverse thrust. The robot jerked to a four-g near-stop in midair, then pirouetted around the first pylon. I negotiated the rest of the first set at 200 klicks an hour, twice the speed of most of the other planes. As I hit the second straight, I barrel-rolled in sheer joy. It had worked perfectly.

As the course went on, seconds seemed like minutes, and



my initial elation settled into a comfortable glow. I was out in front, and nobody could touch me.

I'd just made the hairpin turn at the far end of the course and was screaming back in for the next obstacle run when the dreaded call came. "*Loose bird! Loose bird!*"

Somewhere in the restricted airspace of the race site was an unauthorized flight — an accident waiting to happen. Instantly, a babble broke out over the race channels. A hard, clipped voice came on the air, telling everyone to shut up and ground *right now*, wherever they could. Military birds were on their way in, and he didn't want any bystanders hurt.

I thought rapidly. Fighters? What the *hell* was going on that they were calling fighters in? Being the dummy I am, I asked.

"An international incident, you airheaded idiot. Now get down, dammit!" Nice guy. Probably a spook.

I bled altitude, but not speed. Something was badly wrong, and I wanted to know what before I committed myself to landing. I scanned ahead as my thoughts raced as fast as my wing.

The music crashed in an urgent crescendo. A flashing red pointer and screaming capital letters announced that a large airborne anomaly was closing at entirely too high a speed. I goosed the fans, jumping like a flea to get above it. A sudden, nasty inspiration flashed through my mind, and I flipped *Sundance* over, letting it drop through a lazy half-loop.

With only a few seconds to steal a glance, I craned my neck to look at the now-retreating anomaly. It was hard to see, looking like nothing so much as a moving blot of the sort of interference that sometimes distorts a TV picture. Concentrating, I queried the robot's demilitarized, but still formidable, sensor suite. Suddenly, a sequence of bizarre images flitted through my mind, finally settling on the artificially razor-sharp computer animation of a show plane. The outline matched a rather crudely painted one I'd noticed earlier that day offering rides to the kiddies. Once I'd seen it, I told the computer to back it off to just a wire-frame place-holder image.

I settled in behind it, and kicked in full afterburners. I'd never needed them before, and the robot only had them at all to allow it a reserve of emergency power in case of trouble on the battlefield. The three-g surge blurred my vision momentarily, and the music pounded with the warning that if I kept this up, I'd melt the engines — if I could stay conscious at the breath-robbing speeds I was getting into.

I patched into the transmitter again. At least, with the

implant translating my thoughts into conventional radio signals, I didn't have to try to talk. "Control, this is racer Mendez. I have the loose bird in sight. Would somebody *please* tell me what's going on?"

As I expected, the hard-ass came back on the line. "I told you to set down. Wait — you said you have him *in sight*?"

"Yep. I'm following him now. But I can't for much longer. So make it quick."

There was a pause of dead air. Probably kicking it upstairs. Then, "What are you flying?"

"A modified ex-Camelotian Army Eagle-Eye TELINT robot. Is that why I can see him and nobody else can?"

"Guess so. How... never mind. Wait one." There was a click-pop. "Don't speak unless spoken to. Answer questions with a 'yes' or 'no'."

Great. Spy stuff. Here I am, shooting over the desert floor at less than fifty meters, doing a cool 500 klicks and accelerating, with my engines threatening to catch fire... and he wants to play games. "*Go!*"

"Plane is *probably* not armed. Two occupants: pilot and kidnap victim. Victim is male Deserite, about thirteen T-years old. Good enough?"

I clicked off and cussed. When I had it out of my system, I shot back a "Yeah."

"Can you get him?"

So there it was. My chance to play hero. I took as deep a breath as the slipstream would let me and replied silently, "I'll try." I said I was stupid.

I was losing ground to the more powerful and streamlined plane. Since I was already at full 'burner, I couldn't get any more thrust. My only alternative was to lighten the load. I hit the fuel jettison, letting liters of precious water stream into vapor behind me. I reconfigured the cyberdisplay hastily, posting a range-to-target readout near the wire-frame and telling the fuel jettison to stop at "two minutes of cruise remaining". If I couldn't get him by then, I never would. I overrode the music, putting on an appropriate piece of pre-colonial new age jazz I'd loved for years, and for which I'd named my plane. The g-meter climbed slowly in tandem with the airspeed indicator.

It worked. The wire-frame expanded gradually until I was a few dozen meters away. I wondered why the pilot hadn't done anything about me — surely, if they had the bucks to coat that plane with video paint, they could afford to put in a few warning sensors. I switched back to the full animation image, asking for maximum resolution. I wanted to know where every seam was.

That was a mistake. The robot lit up its active sensors, painting the target. He sure as hell detected *that*, because suddenly he was all over the sky. At first, I tried to keep up, bruising my ribs with a couple of the more violent maneuvers.

Then I realized that, no matter how fast he was, he couldn't possibly match my dinky *Sundance* in the turns, and all his jinking was just slowing him down. He probably thought some army tiltrotor was trying to peg him. So I started to cut the corners on his curves, turning inside him and hanging on for dear life.

Finally, he must have figured that the danger was past, because he settled back into level flight. I didn't have much time, because he had more raw horsepower than I did. And it looked like he was going to use it.

By this time, I'd planted myself just behind and above him. I inched over to one side of his stabilizer and noticed that the canopy was still visible, floating in the middle of the riot of smeared colors that the video paint put out. Two seats, all right. The kid was probably in the front one; it had the better view for the paying customer.

Now what? I dropped back into a blind spot and thought some more. I wasn't armed, and anything I could throw out of one of the equipment lockers I had aboard would disappear aft instantly in the rushing slipstream. The only thing I really had was the Eagle-Eye itself.

I looked down at the hull immediately under my body. Military vehicles were always overengineered, especially Cam stuff. And one of the selling points when I'd bought the thing was the ruggedness of the hull. I gritted my teeth. *This'll hurt me a lot more'n it'll hurt you.*

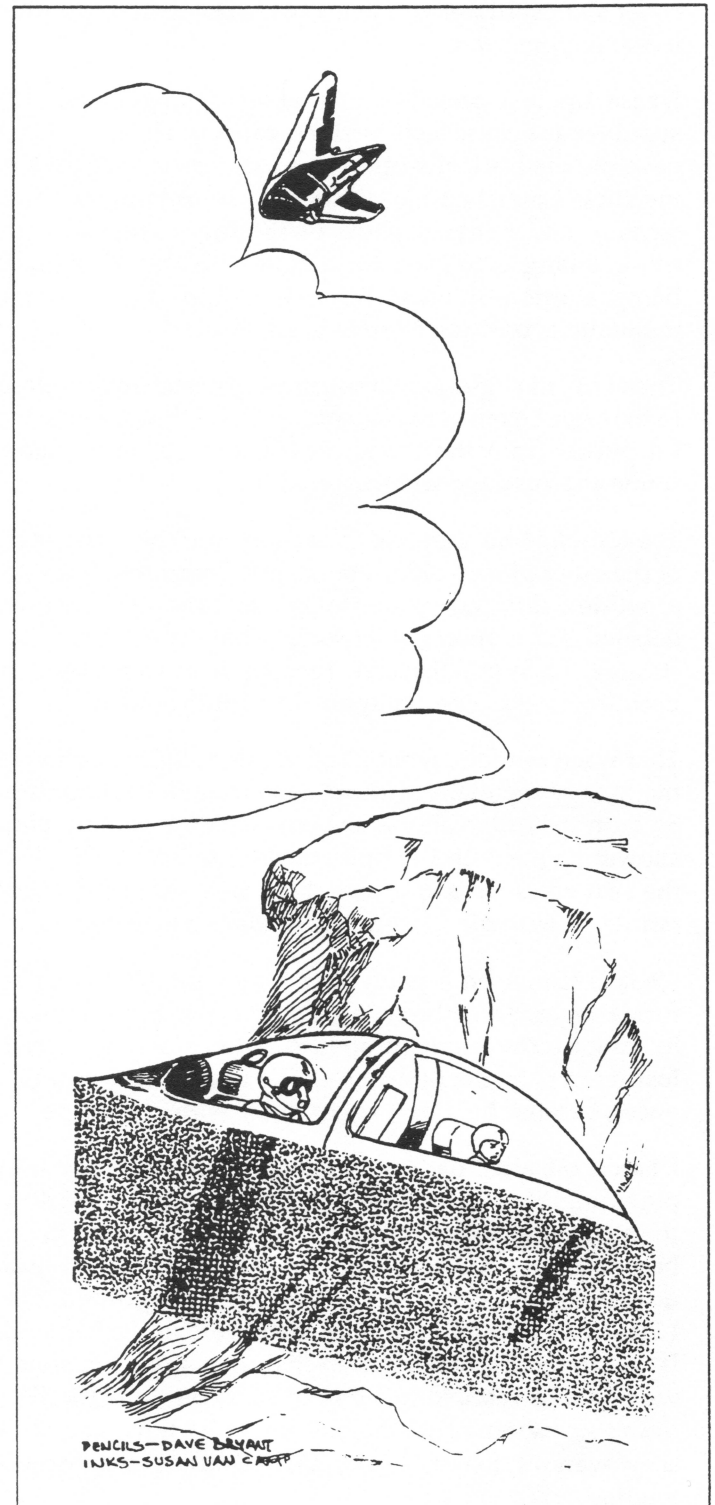
I tossed the wing into a spinning climb, closing my own eyes and relying on the robot's rock-steady image enhancement to keep me oriented. The other pilot slewed his head around, trying to figure out what was going on. Sure enough, he jerked the stick slightly to one side in reflex. Not much, but just enough; he dropped a few clicks of speed. I brought *Sundance* back down, still rolling. The reinforced triplet with its faired-in wheel plowed into the other plane's stabilizer at 150 kph. I flinched, and he did a whole lot more.

Torn metal and composite rained away, and the robot brain went berserk. Amber icons flashed on, indicating bent control surfaces and missing platelets. The landing gear was gone entirely. But then, I noted when I was able to look again, so was the top of his rudder. What was left was jammed in place at a sickening angle. Good. That'd slow him down and limit his options without crashing him.

He was a quick thinker once he got the idea, though. I

watched his airbrakes open like flowers. I whipped past, tumbling, and picked up one of those shockingly clear mental snapshots people get at times like this. The kid was indeed strapped into the front seat, obviously terrified out of his wits.

I didn't want to find out if the other plane was armed, so I straightened out and slid into another diving loop. I kept the robot's eye on the thing while I concentrated on my



next move. He clearly wasn't too interested in playing around — he just wanted out of here.

I brought my injured baby around and up under him. I'd figured out what I would do, and I'd get just one chance to do it; the fuel icon had just turned amber, too. Working quickly but carefully, I released the cover to the emergency tool box, crying out loud as it swung free on its hinge, battering my hand when I reached inside. I felt around, found the right tool, and pulled back, letting the cover slam shut again. Then I twiddled with it, carefully loosening the head.

I rose up just ahead of his wing, glancing over my shoulder as I came level with his canopy. He saw me and gave me the bird. His other hand started to pull back on the stick. I matched his climb, hyperventilating with the tension, and released some of the flight control to the robot, telling it to keep formation with the other plane. Being a literal-minded idiot, it would do its best to maintain its position relative to its "leader".

Then I rolled slightly, bringing my outstretched arm closer to the clear Lexan of my target. I pointed the power driver I'd pulled from the toolkit at the join between canopy frame and fuselage and triggered it.

The loosened bit shot free, punching into the softer metal of the other plane's skin. The plane's computer, detecting a sudden fatal compromise in the canopy's integrity, debated for a moment, unsure what to do about this strange, uncertain hazard. Finally, it compromised by deciding to eject one occupant, but not the other.

That wasn't exactly what I had in mind; I'd hoped to pull the canopy manually without activating the ejection seat. So both the other pilot and I gaped as the canopy blew, showering me with 100-kph shards of safety plastic. Then the seat rocketed away, scorching what little fur wasn't reddened with blood from hundreds of tiny cuts.

"Jeezus Christ on a pogo stick," I swore. Canceling the formation order, I broke away from the fugitive plane, looking for the 'chute. It opened right on schedule, and I lost interest in the other guy. The feeling was mutual, I guess, because he didn't try to screw with my rescue.

I hared off after the bright orange parachute, my heart pounding. The fuel icon had just turned red. I shut down the afterburners and throttled back to idle; the icon flicked back to amber. No problem now — I'd just follow the kid down and land next to him when he hit the ground. Then I looked down and noticed that we were in the badlands. If we survived touchdown in that rock-strewn nastiness, we might be rescued in a day or so. I couldn't risk that; I didn't know how bad the boy might be hurt, and while they weren't major, I did have wounds that needed tending.

When I caught up with him, he hung limp in the harness, unconscious. I circled, looking for obvious injuries. I didn't see any, but then I was no doctor. Finally, I backed off, then turned and dropped all the speed I could. At 80 kph, the wing sprouted all sorts of lift-assistance devices. The damaged, partially inoperative sections gave *Sundance* an alarmingly drunken feel. At 60 kph, I felt the nozzles swiveling to vertical and throttling up. The fuel icon went back to red. I overrode the nozzles, holding the speed at sixty and gently falling toward the kid.

I slowly and painfully pulled myself to my knees, bracing as best I could against the heavy wind. The taut safety straps sang, and I spread my arms to catch the limp form as I flew into him.

The impact nearly knocked me flat on my back, sending lancing agony through both knees as they bent double. Without attempting to move any further, I banged at the harness release knob with a fist. Once, twice, again. The third time, it popped free and the potentially deadly drag of the parachute whipped away, nearly taking my helmet off as a harness strap caromed off my faceplate.

I manhandled the rag doll I'd suddenly acquired onto the rubber matting, then lay down over him, shielding his unprotected face as best I could. After what had seemed like an eternity, I breathed a hearty sigh and returned my attention to the problems of flight. The fuel icon had gone red again while I'd been distracted. I swore.

I dropped down to just a couple of meters off the deck, keeping my speed as low as I could safely manage, and tried to use ground effect to help conserve fuel. It was a pretty vain attempt, because the ground was so broken that I couldn't consistently stay low enough and when I could, the angled rocks blew the air bubble all over the place.

I radioed my position, using the robot's inertial navigator. They promised that a rescue tiltrotor was already on its way. "I hope to God so," I muttered after I signed off. All I could do at this point was cruise for as long as I could, then hope I could find a decent place to set down.

I looked down at the cause of the whole mess. Charming looking kid. Probably a real hellion if he looked that angelic in his sleep. Suddenly he stirred against me and mumbled something unintelligible.

Abruptly his eyes flew open as he realized just what the warm softness covering him was. He blushed bright red, his expression the most amazing mix of furtive enjoyment and thorough embarrassment I'd ever seen. I distracted him with a, "How do you feel? Are you hurt anywhere?"

He shook his head. I opened my mouth to continue, but the fuel icon started blinking. I hissed, "Hold on," and

swept the area just ahead for a good spot. Not much, just as I figured. I picked the best of a bad lot, vectored for it, then swung the vents down for a vertical landing. The fans choked off just a few meters short, and *Sundance* lunged into a very brief free fall, pancaked onto a large turtlebacked boulder, then skidding down the far slope. I closed my eyes as the ground came up. That didn't help, since I could still see through the robot's eyes. I felt a massive yank, then the sensation of being snuffed like a candle..

• • •

I lay against the cool concrete wall of a hangar, swathed with bandages that already prickled my fur. At least he hadn't been hurt; I'd made a wonderful shock absorber. But *Sundance* was badly beat up and needed thousands of dollars of work that we couldn't afford. The race had been called when the first "loose bird" call had gone out. To add insult to injury — literally — the brat's father had chewed me out thoroughly. Not only had my antics endangered his son, but my scandalous lack of morals had probably corrupted the kid to boot. I felt wretched, physically and mentally.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and looked up to see a woman whom I'd figured to be the mother. She'd stood quietly by, saying nothing and checking her son over the way any mother does, doctor's assurances or no, as her husband raked me over the coals.

"I apologize for my husband's behavior. He's... very devout, and has a position in the community to uphold. It was his fear for our son speaking." I nodded. Mormons, of course — Deseret was colonized by them. I could see how being indebted to a naked furry woman pilot wouldn't sit too well with the more conservative ones.

"I'm deeply grateful for our son's life. I can't begin to express my thanks, but perhaps this will help. I understand that your airplane was very badly damaged."

"Yeah. Y'got that right." I was too tired and sore to be more polite. I looked away and hung my head between my upraised knees.

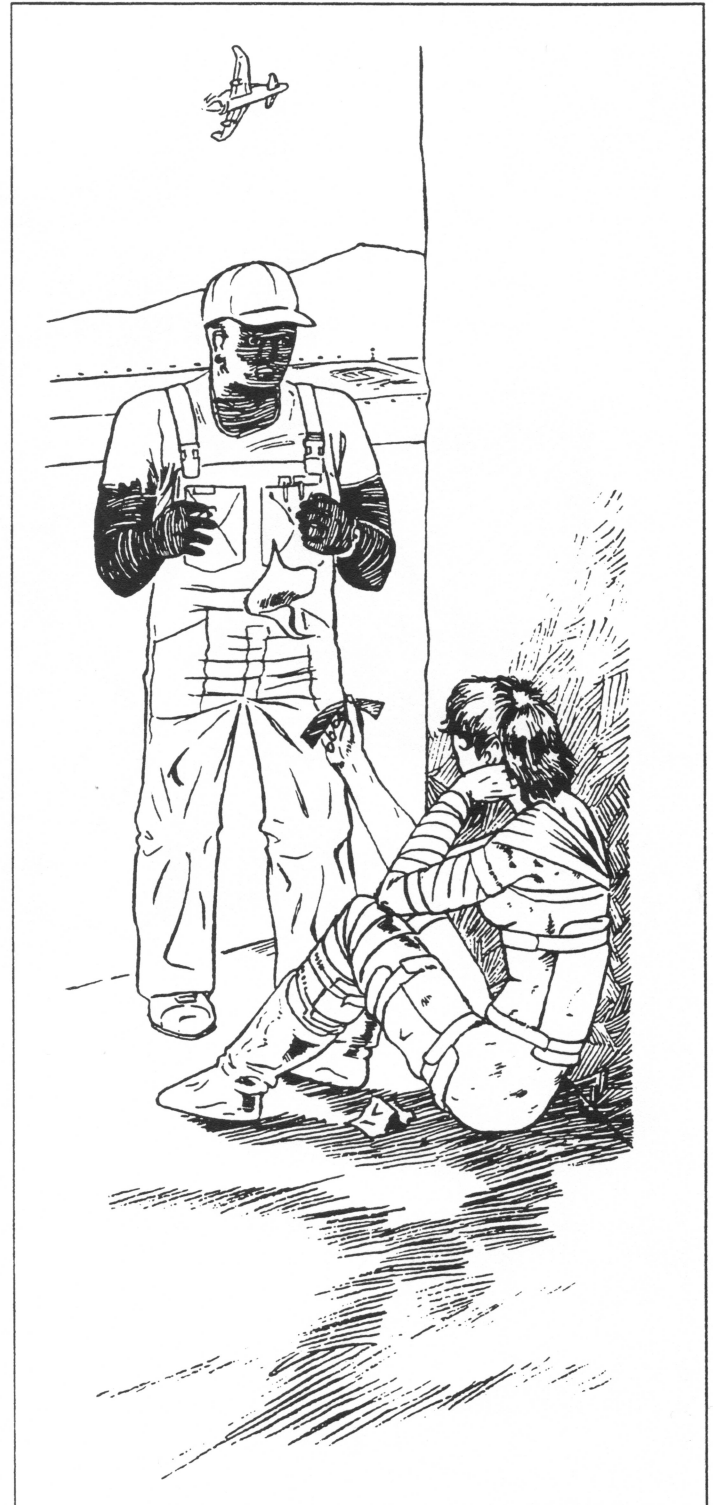
An envelope appeared at the edge of my vision. "Here." I looked over without much interest and took the crisp white paper. She repeated, "Thank you. And keep flying." Then she walked away, back around the corner of the hangar.

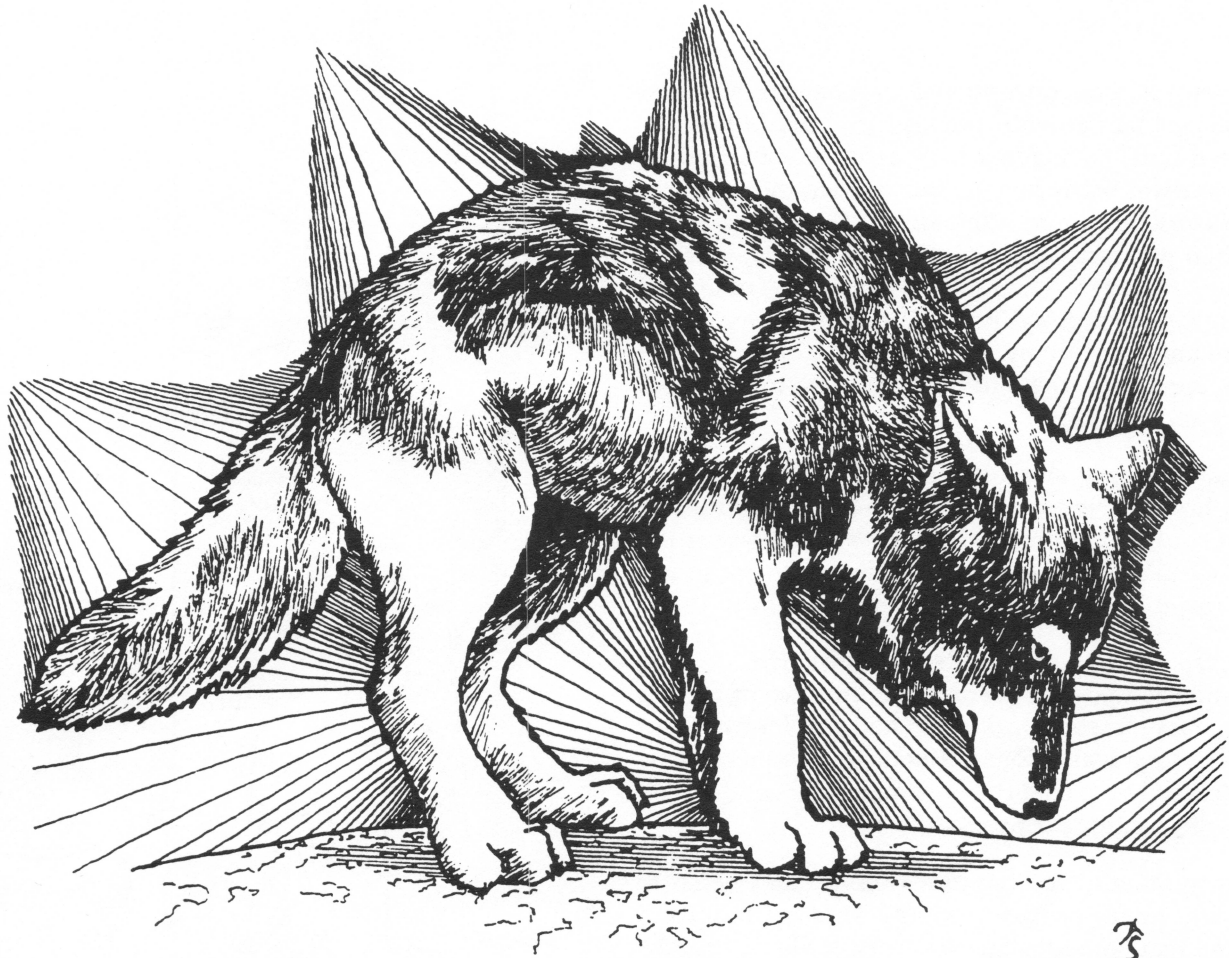
I slit the envelope open with a fingernail and held it open to look inside. Then I snatched out the contents and examined it more closely in disbelief. No, I was right the first time. The check did say \$10,000. And it was signed by her, not him. The paper fell into my lap and I stared across

the still-busy field.

Monty finally came looking for me. He looked more dejected than I'd ever seen him. "It's shot, honey. Nobody'll put up enough to fix it after this fiasco." The expression on his face when I held up the check almost made it all worthwhile.

Almost. ☹





TSW 91

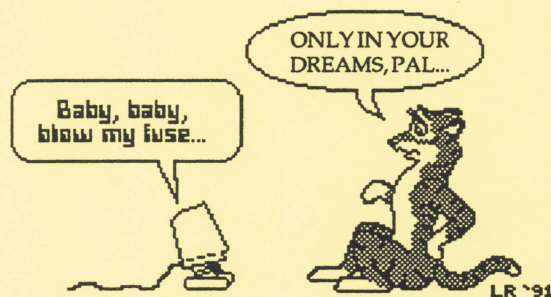
The Last Bits

DISPATCHES FROM THE ELECTRONIC FRONT

At this time we would like to remind you all that submissions and inquiries may be sent electronically via e-mail. If you have any questions regarding pricing, orders, submissions, or you just want to talk, you can reach us at:

krisk@apple.com

(Kris Kreutzman)



or at the official YARF! BBS, Northstar. Submissions sent electronically need to be in ASCII format... floppies mailed to us should be Macintosh floppies if possible. If you send MS-DOS disks, make sure the material you send is in plain ASCII. We have a variety of Macintosh word processors to work with, but our MS-DOS repertoire is severely limited.

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